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THE BATTLE OF THE BAINSIZZA

FOLLOWED BY A STUDY
ON POLITICAL DIRECTION AND MILITARY COMMAND
IN THE GREAT WAR

TO THE ITALIAN INFANTRY

I OFFER THIS TESTIMONY
TO ITS VALOR

INFORMATION NOTE

The work consists of two parts, namely: The Battle of the Bainsizza; Political Direction and Military Command in the Last War.

“The Battle of the Bainsizza” brings out the excellent qualities displayed by our army, especially by the infantry, in August-September 1917.

In this battle the XXIV Army Corps gives us a fine example of crossing a river in the presence of the enemy and breaking through the enemy lines in order to gain freedom of maneuver beyond the breach. The author explains why the breakthrough was not exploited.

The study on “Political Direction and Military Command in the Great War” was undertaken between 1926 and 1927 in order to define, in a few pages, the situation preceding the Battle of the Bainsizza. It explains the reasons for that situation.

The author demonstrates that on the side of the Entente there was no unity of political direction and that, as a consequence, there was no unity of military command either. Such unity was possible on the Franco-Belgian front, where there was one enemy, one political aim, and one front. Only national or personal feelings and passions opposed unified command there. Toward the end of the war, however, events compelled the Allies to overcome even that difficulty on their front.

On the Italian front, far from the Franco-British front, there was a different enemy, and our political aims conflicted with those of the Allies. These reasons, and the absence of an authoritative and magnanimous general, prevented unity of Anglo-Franco-Italian command.

PREFACE

I follow the narrative of the Battle of the Bainsizza with an essay on the relationship between political direction and unified command in the Great War. It clarifies the reasons that provoked, if they did not justify, our eleventh offensive on the Isonzo.

I found myself compelled to undertake this study in order to summarize accurately the political and military situation preceding the Battle of the Bainsizza. But the subject is so vast that it embraces the entire political conduct and the entire military conduct of the Great War, so that its complete treatment would require several weighty volumes.

Within this great panorama the Battle of the Bainsizza is only a fine episode.

I shall confine myself to setting forth, in broad outline, my ideas and impressions, conceived and received during the war or, later, while reading the works written by the principal actors in politics and in the conduct of the armies. Even if I cited every source each time, I could not be certain of the correctness of my judgments, because the sources themselves are not exact, their authors seeking—even unconsciously—to mitigate or leave in the shadows their errors and to bring their merits into the light.

Nor have I been able to avoid some repetition, because various subjects had to be considered both from the political and from the military point of view, in the camp of the Entente as well as in that of the Central Powers.

I have tried to remain dispassionate and not to conceal the gaps contained in my work.

I can, however, reach this conclusion. On the side of the Entente, there was never in fact a unified command in the Great War, because there was never a unity of political direction. Such unity is indispensable in coalition wars if unity of military action is to be achieved. The French command, which was recognized as the unified command toward the end of the war, was not suited to exercise it. This was not because it lacked the necessary technical qualities, but

because political considerations prevented it from directing the Entente's war and narrowed its breadth of mental vision, limiting its capacity to the Franco-German war alone.

On the side of the Central Powers, Germany, having assumed the greater burden of the war, had the right and the duty to direct the coalition's policy and military action. But the men who ought to have taken the helm into their hands had neither the strength nor the will to do so during the first phase of the war. Later, the political aims of Austria-Hungary diverged from those of Germany, and in the final year of the war, although a unified command existed, unity of military action was not in fact achieved.

THE BATTLE OF THE BAINSIZZA

CHAPTER I

THE SITUATION BEFORE THE BATTLE

1. THE GENERAL SITUATION

The main outlines of the military situation at the beginning of 1917 may be summarized as follows:

The Western Front extended from the North Sea to the Adriatic, interrupted by Switzerland, wedged between the Anglo-French sector and the Italian sector. The first had a front of 750 kilometers; the second, 650.

The Entente's Eastern Front extended from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and was held by Russia, joined in 1916 by Romania.

The Entente enjoyed freedom of navigation at sea.

Between those two fronts, the northern side was closed by the northern seas and neutral Denmark; on the southern side there was a secondary front, between the Black Sea and the Adriatic, which was not completely closed.

Although they were not completely enclosed in the south, the Central Powers could be regarded as an immense fortress under siege.

Yet, because they occupied the center of the Entente's deployment, they possessed great freedom to maneuver along interior lines, aided by their rich railway network, which allowed them to transfer reserves easily from one front to another.

Thus the compact bloc of the Central Powers held its own against all the enemy's fighting forces, and the war had assumed the character of a struggle of attrition.

—The side that first exhausts its means of life and war will be defeated.—

In that situation, the strategic principle of economy of force had predominant value, and freedom of navigation at sea gave the Entente a decisive advantage.

By the beginning of 1917 the Entente had passed through its most dangerous moment, caused by the submarine war, which had

threatened to cut off its supplies. Britain had risked being left without food, but it soon found ways to lessen the action of the submarines, while the German personnel suitable for employing that weapon was diminishing because of losses and exhaustion. The Entente was therefore able to continue drawing forces and resources from the whole world.

It had an unlimited field of supply, and its wartime economic balance was fairly easy, broad, and flexible. The Central Powers, on the other hand, though prosperous and rich at the beginning of the war, had already begun by 1915 to feel the limits of their resources closing in upon them.

One must not conclude from this that freedom of navigation has the same strategic importance in every military situation. Had the Central Powers been able to count upon the collaboration of the Russian Empire, they would have drawn the means and forces necessary for war not only from Russia's vast and rich domain but also from almost all of Asia. In that case the value of maritime supremacy would have been far smaller for the Entente.

Until the spring of 1917 the land forces in conflict were in balance, although the Central Powers were numerically inferior.

In fact, on the Eastern Front the Entente had 1,800,000 Russian and Romanian troops against 1,000,000 Austro-Germans, while on the Western Front 2,400,000 Austro-Germans faced 3,400,000 French, British, and Italian troops (1). Effective superiority passed temporarily from one side to the other and revealed itself through the initiative in operations.

(1) These figures are very approximate.

The most important event of that year was the Russian Revolution. It destroyed the Eastern Front and replaced it with a vast, chaotic, unusable zone, like an enclosed sea; it shifted superiority in forces to the Central Powers and prolonged the war.

The Central Powers realized this in fairly good time, but they did not know how, or were unable, to derive all the advantages it offered them. The Entente realized it somewhat late and did not know how to avert its consequences.

Within this general picture, the Battle of the Bainsizza may be regarded as a belated episode of that superiority of Entente forces which was still effective during the first part of 1917. Caporetto, on the other hand, was the first episode of its inferiority.

2. ITALY ISOLATED BEFORE AUSTRIA

In 1917 Italy appeared, and was in fact virtually, isolated before all the armed forces of Austria. As early as June—perhaps partly as a result of our May offensive—those forces were already moving from the Russian-Romanian front toward the Italian front. At that time only ninety-nine French and British artillery pieces were with us.

The moment was approaching when, for the first time, Italy under arms would find herself alone against all the forces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and would have to put all her energies to the test in a duel to the death.

Under those conditions, we might have acted solely according to the aims of our own war, all the more so because our Allies, at that time, showed us little consideration.

There was a certain lack of mutual understanding between us and our Allies, due largely to the fact that we were not represented in their war, nor were they in ours; that is, no Italian corps was fighting alongside them in France, and no French or British corps was on our front. They were like two separate struggles.

During the final phase of the war, although perfect harmony did not prevail between the political action of some Allies and our own, the presence of Allied troops in Italy and the action of our troops in France nevertheless helped to eliminate the military mistrust and misunderstandings of the first part of the war.

An examination of Italy's conduct toward her Allies in the middle of 1917 shows that generosity was not lacking on our side.

Italy secured the right flank of the Anglo-French deployment and relieved the Franco-British front of as many enemy divisions as Austria committed on our front, or only slightly fewer. Italy had undertaken a military task greater than our Allies had expected of her and certainly greater than the commitments assumed by our statesmen during the

negotiations for the Treaty of London, because by then Italy had taken Russia's place in the war against Austria.

According to the Minister of War Paul Painlevé, the partnership of Foch and Pétain—then raised to the supreme command in France—foresaw the disintegration of the Russian army; and since the American general Pershing had assured them that only in July 1918 could an American army of one million men be assembled in France, the new French command, with the approval of its government, decided to remain on the strategic defensive. In practice, the two French generals maintained the strategic defensive until July 1918.

But while the French command acted independently of the Allies and thus adopted the strategic defensive in fact, General Cadorna believed that he still had to conduct two great offensives, one in August and the other in October of that year, 1917, because of commitments previously undertaken with the other Allies, who urged him to honor them.

In August 1917 the Italian Supreme Command still did not attribute such importance to the defection of the Russian army as to believe that it altered the Entente's military situation, thereby canceling all previous commitments or at least inducing us to reconsider their advisability.

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The Italian Government felt its isolation, and our military commander recognized it as a matter of fact.

In that situation we might have acted as our military interests advised. The question to be posed would then have been this: after the Russian defection, when our Supreme Command had already observed the transfer of enemy divisions from the Russian-Romanian front to the Italian front, what course of action should Italy follow? The solution should have been established by the Government after hearing the military commander's opinion, or, better still, agreed jointly by the two authorities.

We could adopt either the offensive or the defensive.

The latter would certainly have been advantageous if properly prepared, and there was time to prepare it. If, instead, we were to choose the offensive, we needed to set ourselves an important and

clear aim, such as the destruction of the enemy forces before they were reinforced by those coming from the Russian-Romanian front. In other words: an offensive intended, while they were still inferior to us, to inflict upon them a defeat sufficient to cancel the advantages Austria gained from the Russian defection.

Posed in this way, the decision to take the offensive could be defended with sound arguments; but it cannot be justified militarily for territorial or otherwise secondary aims that could not materially improve our situation. The commitments toward the Allies assumed on Italy's behalf by our Supreme Command—and until then amply fulfilled by us—to draw Austrian forces onto our front in order to relieve the Allied front ceased on the day when we stood isolated before Austria-Hungary.

It was certain in August 1917 that we would soon have all the Austrian forces against us. Therefore, only a firm conviction of the necessity of thoroughly defeating Austria-Hungary before the arrival of the forces from the Eastern Front could have launched us into an all-out offensive. If that conviction did not exist, the defensive was imperative.

Cadorna enjoyed great freedom of action, and this does honor to the Italian Government; but the future historian will wish to know whether, before undertaking commitments with the Allies, Cadorna had obtained the Italian Government's consent. Italy in the first decade after the war does not concern herself with this fact, although it has considerable value for the study of relations between government and command. In this way Italy gives proof of generosity and high-mindedness.

In August 1917 Cadorna decided upon the offensive generously and with high-mindedness.

CHAPTER II

THE OPERATIONAL PLAN

1. THE ATTACK FRONT

The general disposition of the Austrian forces on the Isonzo front was known to our commands.

They knew that the Austrian tactical system was strong in the sector between the Vodice and the sea, both because of the defensive works and because of the forces manning them. We had compelled the Austro-Hungarians to make it so through our continual offensives against that sector of the front. The defensive system there was so deep that the range of our artillery could not reach its last lines.

It was the only part of our front where our enemies possessed a defensive organization and density of forces comparable to those existing on the French front. Moreover, we harassed them with the so-called “raids” in the same customary directions as our attacks, thereby keeping the enemy constantly alert there.

Another well-fortified sector of the Austrian front was the Tolmino bridgehead.

Between the Jelenik and the Tolmino bridgehead, however, the Austro-Hungarian defensive crust was far thinner, the forces less dense, the defensive system incomplete, and the defenders’ attention dulled by prolonged inactivity.

2. THE SUPREME COMMAND’S PLAN AND GENERAL CAPELLO’S MODIFICATION

According to a plan drawn up by the Italian Supreme Command at the end of May 1917, the offensive later carried out in the second half of August was regarded as a continuation of the one already undertaken in May itself.

The new offensive was not separated from the preceding one.

This was a serious defect. Every battle plan must be a work in itself, distinct from previous battles, unless one wishes to renounce surprise in whole or in part. An attack expected by the enemy in a direction already known to him has very little chance of success.

The Third Army (Duke of Aosta) was to continue the offensive on the Carso, with the Comen Plateau as its objective.

The Second Army (General Luigi Capello) had as its principal objective the Ternova Plateau and as a subsidiary objective—intended to facilitate the conquest of the first and consolidate its possession—the Bainsizza Plateau. It was an offensive over a very broad front, to which the Supreme Command assigned great resources—fifty-one infantry divisions, one and a half cavalry divisions, and 5,200 guns—but resources that were not excessive in view of the breadth of the attack front.

The strategic purposes of that plan are not clearly apparent. One may assume that it was intended to satisfy Allied requirements and to consolidate and secure the occupation of Gorizia.

The Supreme Command left General Capello free to determine the extent of the operation toward the left, that is, toward Tolmino.

General Capello intended to include in his operation an attack upon the Tolmino bridgehead from the Bainsizza side, extending the battle toward the left and giving the Bainsizza objective the character of the principal objective.

Thus, for General Cadorna the principal objective was the Ternova Plateau, whereas for General Capello it was the Bainsizza.

The Tolmino bridgehead was a grave threat to the rear of the Second Army's deployment, because it could serve as the base for an operation directed against that army's rear areas; it was therefore natural that its commander, General Capello, should be anxious to eliminate that threat. But by broadening the attack front in this way, the available forces, although large, became rather scanty, especially because the Austrians had already transferred toward us several divisions from the Russian-Romanian front, a fact known to our high commands. If the breakthrough succeeded, the forces required to widen it and exploit the victory would be lacking.

This eleventh Battle of the Isonzo, as I have already noted, was not to be an operation in its own right, with its own strategic concept, front, and direction of attack; rather, it was regarded as a continuation of the tenth battle, fought in the preceding May.

It may be said that the entire series of our offensives on the Isonzo was launched against a repeatedly tested sector of front, now a little farther south, now a little farther north, but always with the same concepts and in the same directions of attack. It was therefore impossible to act by surprise.

By extending the Second Army's offensive toward Tolmino, General Capello shifted his main action into a new direction and against a sector of front never previously attempted (1), where surprise was possible, although this idea was not expressed and perhaps did not form part of the Second Army commander's offensive concept.

(1) I do not count the small demonstrative operation of the preceding May from Loga toward the Fratta.

Substituting his own concept for that of the Supreme Command, General Capello therefore ordered a principal, decisive operation between Pod-Selo and Monte Santo by three army corps—the XXVII, XXIV, and II—which later became four, over a front of seventeen kilometers (which by the end of the operations became twenty-five kilometers), together with two decisive but secondary operations: one on the extreme left, by the IV Army Corps for the conquest of the Mrzli; and the other on the extreme right, by the VI Army Corps.

In substance, the objectives of our offensive were territorial. Yet, at a conference with his most senior officers, the commander of the Second Army, General Luigi Capello, had said that wherever the enemy line was broken he "would send the torrent of humanity through." This might have indicated a clear offensive determination to destroy the enemy forces. But many arrangements had to be made if that passage were to be possible in the favorable eventuality envisaged.

If the breakthrough occurred—as it actually did—on the front of the XXIV Army Corps, then in order to "send the torrent of humanity through" it, very important preparations had to be made before the operation and during its first phase. They were not made.

Those arrangements were not made, and perhaps were not even foreseen, because the form given to the operational plan by both the Supreme Command (General Cadorna) and the command of the Second Army (General Capello) did not permit them.

Those arrangements would probably have been made if the problem had been posed, for example, as follows:

The Austrian front contains an extremely strong zone from Monte Santo to the sea and another equally strong zone around Tolmino.

The first contains the larger body of Austrian forces and, in the event of retreat, has Ljubljana and Trieste as its centers of attraction.

The Tolmino zone, smaller in extent though extremely strong, contains the smaller body of forces and constitutes a threat to the Second Army's deployment.

The two bodies are joined by a curtain between the Tolmino bridgehead and Monte Santo. That curtain is more strongly provided with works or forces in the south, between the Jelenik and Monte Santo, and less strongly provided in the north, between the Jelenik and the Lom di Tolmino.

It is necessary to:

Attack the curtain, break through it, drive straight ahead until the two bodies are completely separated and it becomes possible to envelop them—either both of them or only the principal one—and cut them off from Ljubljana.

With the problem posed in this manner, it would not have been necessary to conduct important demonstrative attacks to pin the principal enemy body to its positions between Monte Santo and the sea. After our more than two years of fanatical persistence in always battering against the same sector of front, between Monte Santo and Monfalcone, it would have been very easy to make the Austrians believe that our operation would not depart from the customary lines of attack. They would have realized the change in our operational direction late—too late for their salvation. It would have been enough for the Third Army to show activity in order to deceive them and to repeat the customary preparation associated with our method of attack.

The execution of the offensive concept set forth above would naturally have required the concentration of the necessary forces against the sector selected for breakthrough and maneuver; consequently, it would also have required all the preparations needed to launch those forces—once we had succeeded in breaking through—toward a complete and perhaps even decisive victory.

Events showed that this would have been possible had we set ourselves the destruction of the enemy forces as the aim of the battle. The course of events also showed that, even by engaging in a frontal battle between Tolmino and the sea—as Cadorna had outlined it, with General Capello's broadening modification—decisive results could have been obtained if reserves of maneuver troops had been prepared and ready to be launched wherever the enemy line was broken.

For this, it would have been necessary for the Allies to give us the eight divisions requested by Cadorna.

CHAPTER III

MILITARY ART IN THE GREAT WAR

1. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

According to the modern conception, and to my own personal conception, the art of war has such a vast field of action that it can embrace all the most vital and active branches of knowledge, because war cannot be separated from international or domestic politics, from state and world economics and finance, from navigation, industry, commerce, and all the exact and applied sciences, and so forth.

Understood in this very broad sense, the man of war should ideally be encyclopedic and universal: he must know how to assess every religious, moral, political, and economic factor, and must take account of everything that exists and may be available either to him or to his adversary. He must be a great statesman and at the same time possess the moral and intellectual qualities especially necessary for the direction and conduct of military operations.

Thus considered, the man of war may assume the role of a benefactor of humanity when his conception of final victory rises above the aim of destroying the adversary's fighting forces and will to wage war; when, that is, final victory is for him merely the necessary means of obtaining a beneficent and lasting peace, and he is magnanimous enough to measure the terms of peace according to the real situation of the defeated.

After conquering Gaul, Caesar gave it the civil institutions of a Roman province and secured it against German incursions, so that it remained at peace for five centuries.

Few men in history have united all the great qualities to which I have referred.

Hannibal, Scipio, and Caesar fought to assure their peoples a lasting peace. For them peace was the end and war the means. Hannibal did not attain his objective; Caesar and Scipio did.

Alexander and Napoleon were driven more especially by a passion for war and for the conquest of peoples and kingdoms, and their work

soon collapsed and disappeared. In the last Great War, the political constitution and organization of the great belligerent powers separated the duties of the statesman from those of the military commander. Thus there was no opportunity for great masters of the art of war—men who gathered all powers into their own hands—to reveal themselves.

In the last Great War two sovereigns, by reason of the political form and organization of their empires, could in fact have assumed all powers and directed both their war policy and their armies, had they possessed the necessary moral and intellectual qualities.

I mean Emperor Wilhelm and Tsar Nicholas. The latter was overwhelmed by the war and the revolution and deserves our pity and respect, because he did not desert his post, bore himself nobly in misfortune, and accepted his cruel fate with Christian resignation. Wilhelm II would have gone down in history as a great emperor had he died before the war.

There was a political organization which, without directing the Entente's political action, had as its sole aim the enemy's complete and unconditional surrender, and it cannot be said that it sought a lasting peace. In any event, it did not direct military operations. I mean the British Government.

In the great European conflagration, therefore, the man of war in the broad sense just described could not emerge, and the study of the art of war must accordingly be limited to the conduct of armies alone.

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Yet even within this limited field of action, great generals had no opportunity to reveal themselves. In the Great War military art had descended from the altar on which Napoleon had placed it as the daughter of a goddess and a man. It had descended in the humble garb of a lowly handmaiden, as the art of siege warfare. The whole divine element had vanished, and only the human, methodical element of siege warfare remained.

In earlier wars strategic conception had been of capital importance. War was a game of masses in movement, and force, space, and time were the three elements of strategic calculation.

In every situation, speed of conception and execution was a mark of genius: the ability to analyze in a flash the various combinations of the absolute and relative values of those three elements, so as to divine what the enemy would do, or to synthesize and select the most favorable combination and put it into effect at the proper moment.

Then the opposing columns marched toward one another, and only a few hours after the advance guards met, the entire preparation for battle was already complete: the deployment and duel of the artillery, and the concentration and deployment of the infantry. Then came the advance to the attack and the assault.

The unforeseen and improvisation played an important part. A commander's eye, intuition and inspiration, and readiness to decide at the opportune moment were the gifts of those favored by victory.

Two tactical factors helped determine the character of the last Great War—the same factors that had already revealed their influence in the Russo-Japanese War. I mean the firepower of small arms—rifles and machine guns—and of light artillery, and I mean barbed-wire entanglements.

No unit could withstand the fire of a few machine guns or a few rapid-firing light guns emplaced for defense. Barbed wire stopped or delayed any attack, whether impetuous or methodical.

The attacker had to seek open space for maneuver on the wings. Hence the tendency to extend and fortify behind broad zones, along long continuous lines whose flanks rested on impassable obstacles. Hence also the need to organize militarily every man fit to bear arms in each belligerent power, in order to man the entire battlefront. Hence again the need to organize all the industries and resources of the various belligerent—and even neutral—nations, in order to provide the enormous organized masses of men with the means to live and fight.

A succession of very strong lines, all manned by troops, formed the defensive zone, whose rearmost line lay beyond the range of the enemy batteries. Artillery of every caliber was deployed along the entire front and echeloned in depth, at an average density of approximately one battery for every two hundred meters of front. Sector reserves were conveniently placed behind the defensive zone,

ready to rush forward to seal any possible breach or to attack during an offensive. Entire armies in general reserve guaranteed the continuity of the front or of the operation in every defensive or offensive contingency.

The armies therefore faced one another within systems of fortification during long periods of preparation. The available force was so great that it saturated the space of the theater of operations, so that the element of force annulled the influence of the other two strategic elements. Where the defensive organization was complete, as it was on both sides of the French front, an offensive launched in any direction encountered such a density of organized forces behind fortified systems that any attack was stopped before the breakthrough, or at least its violence was reduced enough for the reserves to halt it after the breakthrough.

The attacker had all the time needed to study and learn the enemy's lines, the disposition of his infantry, and the deployment of his artillery, and thus to prepare an offensive with a chance of breaking through the enemy defensive organization as in the siege of a fortress. He placed numerous powerful batteries of every caliber before the sector to be attacked, in order to destroy its defenses systematically, because heavy guns were the only means available to the offensive for opening a passage to maneuver. This element, practically immobile during the battle, made the offensive ponderous and unsuited to rapid movement.

2. THE FUNCTIONS OF THE VARIOUS COMMANDS

The principal function of the Supreme Command was to determine the front and direction of attack and to assign the forces for the operation. The choice of the man who was to direct the operation was usually tied to the choice of the attack front. The army or army-group commander holding that sector of the front directed the operation.

The intelligence—not genius, for that word would be out of place—of the Supreme Command revealed itself in selecting a direction of attack with some strategic value.

The army or army-group commander directing the offensive operation distributed the forces, deployed the artillery, and established the opening and the successive methods of the operation in methodical detail, sometimes down to the meter and the minute. For this command, skill showed itself in organizing surprise, in knowing the enemy's lines of weakness, and in exploiting them during the operation. At times an opportunity arose during the battle to develop an interesting maneuver not included in the program, but it was rarely exploited.

Then came the task of the executors—the army-corps and divisional commands. They had to prevent the enemy from learning of the preparations and offensive intention. The artillery deployment was carried out and the infantry placed in readiness for the offensive—in other words, the battle had already begun—without the enemy becoming aware of it.

On the generally mountainous Italian front, these executors played a decisive part in the preparation and hence in the success of the operation. They were responsible for the analytical study of enemy positions, in order to locate batteries, command posts, observation posts, machine guns, and concealed or hidden light guns, so that these could be destroyed or neutralized either before the infantry advance or during it.

Once everything had been properly prepared, the artillery preparation began on a fixed day and at a fixed hour and lasted as long as was considered necessary to crush, within the enemy lines, the batteries, command posts, observation posts, light guns, machine guns, and riflemen. The infantry then went to the assault and, if the preparation had been well executed, the attack succeeded. In that case the infantry generally penetrated more or less deeply into the enemy lines, and the commanders regarded themselves as satisfied and victorious.

After 1916, public opinion in all belligerent and neutral powers was convinced that the struggle had assumed the character of attrition, that offensives led to no decision, and that persisting in them was a ruinous error.

That verdict of public opinion still did not influence the military chiefs of some powers. They deplored it because they believed that, instead, it influenced their troops, made them less fit for action, compromised the success of their attack plans, and accounted for the meager results they obtained. They therefore asked their governments to adopt severe measures against those who spread such ideas, while meanwhile persisting in their offensive operations.

In France the military chiefs—whether from personal conviction, because they were more subject to the influence of public opinion, or because they could not do otherwise—remained on the defensive while urging the Allies to attack. Thus they were fortunate.

3. THE DEFECT IN THE GREAT WAR'S DEFENSIVE SYSTEM

The general defensive system of all armies in the last war contained a defect of which few people were then aware.

The long continuous trenches extending for hundreds of kilometers along several successive lines were defended by artillery and infantry, all deployed and oriented toward frontal defense.

All this formed the defensive zone, which contained the greater part of the army's forces.

The deployment of the forces did not concern itself with the flanks, which at the two extremities rested on the sea or on neutral states. But when an offensive succeeded in breaking through at one point of the long line, it opened at that point two undefended flanks, which allowed the attacker to conduct an enveloping maneuver.

Corresponding to this defect of the defense was the attacker's mistaken tendency to penetrate as deeply as possible into enemy territory. This tendency, the result of an imperfect application of strategic reason, led men to believe that success was greater in proportion to the breadth of enemy territory occupied. It was the tendency of siege warfare, which aims at occupying the central citadel.

Yet the defensive zone contained two-thirds of the enemy infantry and almost all his artillery; its destruction should therefore have been the principal aim of the offensive battle.

Consequently, if the attacker wished to disorganize the enemy forces, he should have aimed systematically at destroying the opposing defensive zone. Once he had penetrated it, instead of trying to deepen the occupation of enemy territory, he should have widened the breach by attacking the two severed ends of the broken front from the flank and rear, concentrating upon them the action of the troops outside the breach and of those already through it.

By extending the breach, the attack would have brought a larger proportion of its own forces into the battle and would have destroyed a greater quantity of enemy forces. Then would have come the maneuver against the defender's reserves in a war of movement.

A battle plan founded on this conception would have conformed to the strategic principle that the aim of battle is not the occupation of enemy territory but the destruction of the enemy forces.

Despite the obviousness of the idea—reminiscent of Columbus's egg—I know of not a single example in the whole Great War of a battle plan conceived, studied, and prepared on this principle by any of the various supreme commands on either side. Nor have I heard or read of a single command that considered and studied a battle plan on this principle and then abandoned it as impracticable.

The high commands readily persisted in ordering frontal attacks upon the strongest sectors of the enemy front, and when they succeeded in breaking through they sought to penetrate more deeply into enemy territory.

A very slight and obscure indication that the attacking forces were to shift laterally to the right after the breakthrough appears in the order for the German offensive of March 1918.

In the preparation and execution of a battle plan, the commander's character, imagination, and intellectual tendencies exert a great influence. If he is convinced that maneuver is impossible, it is better not to speak of maneuver. He will never seek it, for a thousand excellent reasons. But in that case he must remain on the defensive.

It is not worth putting hundreds of thousands of men out of action merely to conquer a trench, a mountain, or even the Bainsizza Plateau.

If the commander is convinced that maneuver is possible and possesses the will, skill, and energy to carry it through, he will find the suitable sector of front, the route to follow, the means and the manner of disposing and employing them, and—most important of all—the men capable of executing his orders.

The first phase of the battle should therefore have aimed at breaking the enemy front, not as an end in itself, not merely for the sake of breaking it, but in order to open two flanks that would permit an enveloping maneuver. It would then have been evident that the strongest sector of the enemy front should not be attacked; instead, the weakest sector should be attacked so that the two flanks could be opened easily and enveloped.

In fortress warfare, common sense in every age has always advised attacking the weakest front.

Although I know of no battle plan based upon the concepts just described, there are nevertheless examples of battles in which they were profitably applied under strategic or tactical directives suggested by temporary or permanent local circumstances.

Gorlice-Tarnów is an example of a breakthrough against a weak sector of the Russian front, followed by a maneuver to the right beyond the enemy defensive zone.

Caporetto is an example of a breakthrough against a weak sector of the attacked front, followed by a lateral maneuver to the right between the lines of the first defensive zone.

In both cases the attacker attained and surpassed the objectives he had set himself.

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The defect in the general defensive system just described was already being felt in 1917, and attempts had been made to remedy it by creating sealed compartments. But it was not easy to organize lateral traverses that were sufficiently strong and sheltered unless the terrain offered naturally strong transverse features protected from the attacker’s fire.

Moreover, the sealed compartments increased the density of forces in the defensive zone at the expense of the reserves; or they assigned the reserves a task before the battle, so that they were no longer available in the commander's hands. Finally, where the density of forces was light, as on our front before and above Tolmino, they contributed to dispersing the forces still further.

4. THE DEFENSIVE ORGANIZATION ON THE ITALIAN FRONT

Until 1917 we never had on the Italian Isonzo front a defensive system as well organized as that found on the French front. The defensive problem was never precisely posed. Lines of trenches were constructed behind the front line, but without determining what forces would man them if necessary.

The lower ratio of forces to the extent of the front made perfect defensive organization at every point impossible.

We had sixty divisions on 650 kilometers of front. Of these, forty were committed to the offensive between Tolmino and the sea—a sector of fifty kilometers—and twenty were on the defensive along the remainder of the front. In France there were 190 divisions on the defensive along 750 kilometers of front.

On the Italian front, the lower density of forces and the geographical and geometrical configuration of the front left an extremely important role to strategy, especially to our disadvantage. Any successful Austro-Hungarian attack in the sector from Tolmino to Lake Garda could have cut off the retreat of two-thirds of the Italian army.

Between Tolmino and the sea, the density of forces was more than sufficient for a perfect defensive organization. But because we had always been on the offensive, we had never in fact organized such a defense, nor was there any need to do so. The available forces were sufficient to halt any attack. On the same sector of front, by contrast, the Austro-Hungarians had been compelled by our ten offensives, all alike, to organize their defenses perfectly. On that front they were stronger than anywhere else. Moreover, through continual raids we

imprudently kept their vigilance constantly awake precisely where we intended to attack.

All this has some historical value and is set down here only to make the Battle of the Bainsizza intelligible. It can scarcely serve for the future. The genius of war laughs at it, like Benvenuto Cellini: "It is quite true that people say, you will learn for another time. That is no use, because it always comes in different and never-imagined forms."

5. THE TACTICAL METHOD

We had adopted a general tactical method, published shortly before our entry into the war.

I do not know whether it was inspired by the results of the first months of fighting on the Western Front. I thought I could detect in it the influence of prewar French ideas, but considered in the abstract it was neither better nor worse than other contemporary or earlier general tactical methods.

It was based on an impetuous and decisive offensive in parallel directions across the whole attack front. It was advisable when the enemy's lines of weakness were known, so that a rapid offensive could be launched in that direction, as the Austro-Germans did at Caporetto.

But I attach no importance to this opinion of mine, just as I attach none to that method, which nevertheless combined several original sins for us Italians and for our terrain.

Before the Great War, our tactical school could not create an original tactical method because it had no traditions.

We had always followed the tactical methods of other armies, rich in military traditions, which had tested their energies, their military qualities, and their defects in great wars.

Those methods were not always suited either to our national character or to our terrain, and they also exerted a harmful influence on our military organization.

We all agree that there are no fixed tactical principles and no recipes for victory; yet every general tactical method is nothing but a recipe.

Once one of these methods has been established, the problem for most executors is no longer to study the enemy and his method in order to defeat him, but simply to apply the recipe.

It must nevertheless be recognized that in peacetime such methods have considerable instructional value.

In tactics various elements are constantly at play, but they are variable. In each individual case, one must try to discover how the adversary will employ or exploit them, so as to fight or forestall him, just as the hunter studies the habits of a wild beast in its natural surroundings and attacks it in order to kill it while avoiding the stroke of its claws.

In tactics nothing is constant or fixed; everything is transitory, and it is naive to publish at the beginning of a war the method by which we intend to attack the enemy.

Instead, one must know the tactical methods of others and study them methodically in order to discover their defects, seams, and lines of weakness, and to enable us to oppose them with another method that exploits those weaknesses—in other words, to possess a method of study and preparation.

This is the art of the great commanders of armies of Italian stock.

Scipio methodically studied the adversary's habits, tactical formations, and tendencies and attacked him in a way that frustrated his arrangements. If the ancient historians are truthful, it was Scipio, not Hannibal, who dominated and directed the Battle of Zama.

In the Commentaries, Caesar describes in incisive phrases the enemy's habits and tactical formations, then sets forth his own dispositions for defeating them.

One must therefore possess a method of tactical study and preparation, so as to be able to create, case by case, our own method of attack or defense according to the weapons available, the terrain on

which we find ourselves, and the qualities and defects of the enemy we are to fight.

This method of preparation and study is far more difficult than imitating others or applying some ready-made tactical method; but it is worthy of a future generation capable of judging the Great War coolly and without rhetoric.

That generation will begin with a tactical method—for example, the present Italian method—and will gradually vary, perfect, and modify it, adapting it to new weapons and applying it against the tactical methods of others.

I do not wish to be misunderstood. I have been speaking here of the tactical orientation to be followed in order to employ harmoniously, in the tactical field, the organization at our disposal, taking account of our qualities and defects and of the adversary's qualities, defects, and military organization.

In the strategic field, by contrast, we must prepare a general scheme of deployment and action, studied year by year and corresponding to the real political and military conditions of ourselves and the adversary.

It would be an error to neglect this preliminary study in obedience to the theory that excludes a priori strategic schemes and relies solely on improvisation according to circumstances.

Among Europe's geographical and political conditions there are immutable, or nearly immutable, facts which only a war can change. There are other conditions and facts that are mutable.

The a priori scheme is inevitably based on the former and is periodically adapted to the latter.

The commander's personality will exert a decisive influence on this periodic adaptation, provided he truly possesses personality through intelligence, education, and military character.

6. OUR INFANTRY

During the first year of the war, the sector of our front incomparably bloodier than any other was that of Monte San Michele,

comprising San Michele, San Martino del Carso, Bosco Cappuccio, and Bosco Lancia, as far as but excluding the Frasche trench. It extended for four to five kilometers.

Our losses there were always extremely heavy; in some battles, however, they were exceeded by the Austrian losses. In some battles, such as the Third Battle of the Isonzo (26 October-4 November 1915), the losses suffered by each side in that sector amounted to more than ten men for every linear meter of front—from 45,000 to 50,000 men on each side.

Boroević, who commanded the Austrians on the Venezia Giulia front, confirms that nowhere in its theater of war did the Austro-Hungarian army have a sector as bloody as that of San Michele. It was on this sector that our infantry gave the highest and most brilliant proof of its valor. With good reason, immediately after the war, the infantryman chose Monte San Michele as the symbol of his heroism and sacrifice and erected there the monument intended to preserve its memory for future generations. San Michele is truly the monument to the heroism of the Italian infantry.

It is impossible for me to forget those first months of our war. Only one who actually fought in the infantry on the Carso and the Isonzo can have a clear idea of the spirit of sacrifice, the contempt for death and for life, the proud and lordly prodigality with which existence was spent, and the tenacious endurance of long watches in water and mud under enemy bombardment displayed by our infantry.

For me, who had spent long years away from Italy, it was a discovery that moved me profoundly—a magnificent revelation.

No infantry could have done more, yet its efforts and sacrifices did not produce satisfactory results. They certainly were not such as to be appreciated, as they deserved, by either Allies or enemies.

It has been said that our infantry was incapable of maneuver. The truth is that, under our tactical methods of the time, infantry units in the line had no possibility of maneuvering. Anyone not convinced of this must have seen the war through a telescope.

Our trenches were generally less than one hundred meters from the enemy's, sometimes only a few meters away, and the intervening

space contained two lines of barbed wire. The whole maneuver consisted of leaving our trench and reaching the Austrian trench in the shortest possible time when the moment came to spring forward—a moment never determined by the infantry officers.

Nor was maneuver possible when, during the approach to the front line, troops were crammed into communication trenches known to and swept by enemy artillery, where our splendid brigades were demolished while awaiting the moment to spring forward.

Yet even under those conditions our infantry devised numerous expedients and contrivances in order to advance, none of which had ever been recommended by any regulation or tactical treatise.

At times, observers from a distance saw our battalions lying motionless on the ground under enemy artillery fire that decimated them, and it seemed to those observers and critics that the battalions might have avoided such losses by moving. But the observers did not know that, had the battalions risen, they would have been mown down by enemy machine guns, and that this alone was why they remained motionless on the ground.

Our infantry possesses the qualities and defects of our people, but it is still composed of men of the same race that carried the Romans to the conquest of the world. They are the same peasants and mountaineers of the Apennines who made up the legions of the Roman Republic: resistant to hardship and privation, convinced that their lives are worth less than ours and may be spent like current coin. Deeply attached to their land, they instinctively feel the need to sacrifice themselves in its defense, without any hope of reward and without any right to one. Nothing more generous exists in the world!

I shall recall only one of our brigades, the Bari Brigade. In 1915 it remained for seventy-five consecutive days in what was then the most dangerous sector of the entire front, that of San Michele, and during those two and a half months it lost 6,500 men and 750 officers. After coming down from the Carso following the Third Battle of the Isonzo, filthy and dangerous as that sector was, it returned under the same conditions three days later with its strength reduced to one-third.

Anyone wishing to speak of the Italian infantry must know these things.

Our infantry is capable of maneuvering under conditions that would immobilize other infantry, as it proved at the Battle of the Bainsizza.

Future military criticism will be severe toward our tactical methods of that time, but it will not repeat that our infantry was incapable of maneuver during the first part of the war.

In general, our regular officers showed excellent professional qualities. On the Carso and the Isonzo the war had sharpened and perfected them. Had they all been professors of tactics, they could have done no more.

"Only one who fought the war on the Carso and the Isonzo, especially during the first two years when we lacked sufficient artillery and trench mortars, fully knows the enormous difficulties that obstructed the successful conduct of operations, and knows that those difficulties were overcome only through the valor and spirit of sacrifice of the troops, and above all of the officers who commanded and inspired them."

I quote these measured and sincere words from a recommendation submitted by an infantry captain for the award of the Silver Medal to one of his subordinates. They are a fitting answer to certain judgments expressed in Italy concerning our infantry officers.

To those marvelous officers of our various infantry branches—dead, wounded, or unhurt—whom we knew and admired so well, only words of gratitude and affection can be addressed. With the profound conviction that I am doing what is just, I express this judgment with a clear conscience.

For instructional purposes it is well to state that the last war did not at all show that infantry officers required exceptional maneuvering qualities, such as quickness in grasping a situation and speed of conception and execution—qualities indispensable in a war of movement and naturally possessed by many Italian officers. Yet it cannot be excluded that they may again be needed in a future war. We must therefore have an organization suited also to a war of movement. "A triangular division and a heavy battalion" mean

positional warfare carried to the extreme, although I do not exclude the possibility that such an organization may be unavoidable in the Alps.

In a war of movement, the commander of an infantry regiment had to display more tactical—and sometimes strategic—skill in establishing a system of outposts or initiating an advance-guard action, and so forth, than brigade commanders had occasion collectively to display during the very long war.

During that war, brigade commanders were firmly fitted into a position and restricted to limited, prescribed movements, because the entire maneuver consisted of leaving one's own trench at a fixed moment to reach the trench occupied by the enemy a short distance away. The battalions then evaporated like drops of water on red-hot iron plates.

The commanders' action was above all moral, and moral qualities were what the units had put to the test, both during the long watches under enemy bombardment and when they had to leap forward and face the machine guns. Any man who lacked heart and will, after the prolonged pounding of enemy artillery or after weeks and months of discomfort, bad weather, privation, and danger, had no alternative but to relinquish the command for which he had not been properly forged.

Anyone who withstood such trials during the first two years of our war on the Carso and the Isonzo may rightly be proud of it.

An officer must possess sound professional and general education, but he is better in proportion as he is firm in character and strong in will, capable of imposing any sacrifice upon himself at any moment.

And when, struck by every adversity and surrounded by ruins, he still retains the strength of will to command himself and others, to gather the ruins, reorganize them, and make use of them, then he is truly the man most worthy to command.

Officers in general therefore certainly require a solid military and general education; but above all they need high qualities of character, and these should be the principal aim of education and instruction in every military school.

For the higher ranks, balance between the highest moral and intellectual qualities is necessary, just as aboard ship, according to Napoleon’s well-known image, the sail plan must be proportioned to the hull: the hull represents character, and the sails intelligence.

CHAPTER IV

THE XXIV ARMY CORPS

1. THE STAFF

In July 1917 I was ordered to take command of the XXIV Army Corps. It was this very corps which, a month and a half later, carried our arms to victory in the battle that, for the Italian Army, took the name of the Bainsizza.

When I assumed command of the XXIV Army Corps, it was on the right bank of the Isonzo, with its sentries and front-line trenches directly along the riverbank between Ronzina upstream and Anhovo downstream, over a front of approximately eight kilometers. Headquarters were at Villa Rubini, two kilometers east of Ipplis.

Within a few days I found myself in perfect accord with my staff. The officers of the XXIV Army Corps headquarters were partly seasoned and partly young and still inexperienced. The former, all graduates of the War School and tested during the first two years of the campaign, knew staff duties perfectly. Reconnaissance, the compilation of situation reports and other reports, the transmission of orders and supervision of their execution, the establishment and operation of the services, disciplinary supervision, and so forth were all very well organized, directed, and carried out.

* * *

Since I am on this subject, I shall allow myself a brief digression.

During the war I happened to command front-line units of varying importance. I found that staff officers in general knew their difficult service very well, although it required the widest variety of knowledge.

Whenever I entrusted them with difficult and dangerous missions of confidence, they fulfilled their task to my complete satisfaction.

At XXIV Army Corps headquarters everything functioned in the most perfect order, with serene and calm activity, and the credit belongs to my officers.

It was likewise due to them that the headquarters functioned as a watertight compartment or buffer that absorbed every shock coming from other directions.

Many of the staff officers under my command had commanded troops in the line, from platoon through battalion and regiment. Some had already been wounded or were wounded later; others lost their lives in the field during the campaign.

In war, officers serving with regiments sometimes regard staff service as a sinecure performed in quiet, comfortable, and sheltered surroundings, compared with themselves, who bear the gravest responsibilities. Certainly, in war the responsibilities fall upon troop commanders, and with them come continuous and intense physical and moral exhaustion, quite apart from the incessant dangers, hardships, and privations. Thus, as regards wartime life, the comparison is unfavorable to staff officers.

It is therefore necessary to avoid granting staff officers advantages in promotion and decorations during the war over troop commanders. Such advantages generally appear undeserved when compared with the services, responsibilities, and sacrifices of direct troop commanders, and they help create a moral and political atmosphere hostile to the staff corps.

If I remember correctly, Napoleon had already observed this and warned generals of high rank not to abuse the power they possessed for the benefit of their staff officers.

After the war there were accordingly unjust demonstrations in Italy against the staff corps—unjust because they were generalized to the entire corps, although they may have been justified in the case of certain more or less prominent officers. The governments of the immediate postwar period, I believe from weakness rather than conviction, yielded to public opinion and contributed through organizational measures to the depreciation of our staff corps, whereas in the interests of justice they should have confined themselves to distinguishing ephemeral personal merits.

Staff officers cannot be created overnight. They require qualities founded upon knowledge, experience, and study—qualities that, except in very rare individual cases, are not naturally possessed.

The organization and structure of the army, mobilization, concentration and strategic deployment, railway movements, transmission of orders, operation of the services, and so forth will be better in proportion as our staff officers are better. Preparation for war and the conduct of the army to victory rest upon them.

The great majority of our staff officers performed their duty extremely well, modestly and without gaining advantages over their comrades who directly commanded troops.

It must therefore remain part of our wartime tradition that our staff corps, like every arm and every other corps, contributed greatly to victory.

That is why I believe this digression is not useless.

2. THE TROOPS

The XXIV Army Corps consisted of the 47th and 60th Divisions. The former was on the left, between Ronzina and the Canale bridge; the latter extended downstream as far as Anhovo.

Later the Monte Tonale and Monte Pasubio Alpine battalions joined the army corps. Later still, at the beginning of August, the 66th Division was placed under my disciplinary and administrative authority. It was tacitly understood that this division would also come under my tactical command if, during the operation already planned and in preparation, I succeeded in crossing the river.

I was pleased to find the brave and experienced General Fara commanding the 47th Division, which consisted of two reliable and highly active Bersaglieri brigades: the 1st Brigade (4th and 21st Regiments), commanded by Brigadier General Leoncini; and the 5th Brigade (6th and 12th Regiments), commanded by Brigadier General Boriani.

During the operation of the preceding May, part of this division had already crossed the Isonzo at Loga in a secondary demonstrative operation, and had then withdrawn by order.

It is difficult to explain the reason, within the general scheme of the previous May attack, for that secondary operation, which might have drawn Austrian attention to their weak point and induced them to reinforce it.

The 60th Division, commanded by General Novelli, comprised the Milano Brigade (159th and 160th Regiments) and the Tortona Brigade (257th and 258th Regiments).

The 66th Division, commanded by General Squillace, was triangular —that is, it consisted solely of the Vicenza Brigade (277th, 278th, and 279th Regiments). The commander of the 66th Division also exercised disciplinary supervision over the Elba Brigade (261st and 262nd Regiments).

Except for the Milano Brigade, which had been formed shortly after the beginning of the war, the others, as their regimental numbers show, were of fairly recent formation, especially the Vicenza Brigade, which was very new. But they were well commanded and had excellent officers.

Our infantry no longer possessed the dash and boldness it had shown at the beginning of the war. Most of our brigades had been subjected for long periods and with great severity to the hardest trials on the Carso and Isonzo fronts, without being given time to rebuild. Nor had they ever seen Victory smile upon them and yield herself completely. Their grave sacrifices had not been properly recognized or appreciated. They had become more cautious and sparing, but also more prudent and battle-hardened.

* * *

The divisional artillery consisted of seasoned field-artillery regiments and experienced mountain-artillery groups, familiar with the terrain and possessing excellent offensive fire methods. They had perfected themselves during the war and were proud to support effectively the infantry with which they were closely integrated.

By August 1917 our heavy field artillery and heavy artillery had reached, in the development of their equipment and offensive fire tactics, such a degree of power, if not perfection, that they could compete advantageously with the excellent artillery of our enemies. Their effectiveness could be counted upon with confidence.

The various branches of the engineers were likewise excellent. I shall have more to say about the pontoniers, who played an extremely important part in the Battle of the Bainsizza.

My detachment of Royal Carabinieri, commanded by an officer of uncommon activity and ability, was worthy of the arm's noble traditions.

Nothing, of course, is perfect; but any general might have considered himself fortunate to command troops such as those composing the XXIV Army Corps.

Defeatist propaganda had attempted to induce the troops not to fight and had obtained some results among brigades at rest. When I assumed command of the XXIV Army Corps, judicial proceedings had already begun before its military court. I allowed justice to take its course and occupied myself with conducting counterpropaganda in my own way.

* * *

The XXIV Army Corps was situated between the II Corps on its right and the IV Corps on its left. The II Army Corps was already entirely beyond the Isonzo, and its line joined that of the XXIV Corps, as the expression goes, bayonet to bayonet, with the river between them.

On the left, however, upstream from Ronzina, there was a gap covered only by a few machine guns and a handful of sentries, which linked up with the IV Army Corps toward Tolmino. But above Ronzina, the Isonzo flows violently through a gorge with almost vertical walls, offering only two or three passages that were extremely difficult even for individual men. Those crossing points were watched by a few of our troops.

Around 20 July, the XXVII Army Corps inserted itself into that sector of the front between the IV and XXIV Corps in order to take part in the battle then being prepared.

CHAPTER V

THE PREPARATION

1. THE ATTACK PLAN

We possessed fairly accurate information concerning the disposition of the enemy forces opposing us.

Ten divisions faced the Second Army: two in reserve and eight in the front line, deployed with increasing density from north to south. The lowest density was opposite the XXVII and XXIV Army Corps; the highest was in the attack zone of the II Army Corps and farther south.

The XXIV Army Corps had before it the 21st Schützen Division, between the Avscek stream and Descla. It consisted of the 41st and 42nd Schützen Brigades.

I had commanded the XXIV Army Corps for only a few days when I was ordered to prepare an attack plan with the following territorial objectives:

1) Crossing the Isonzo; occupation of the plateau rim between the Semmer and the Jelenik; occupation of the rim of the Bainsizza between the Ossoinca and Point 856 on the Oscedrik. (Later, in order to facilitate the advance of the II Army Corps, the XXIV Army Corps was also assigned the occupation of Point 747, south of the Jelenik, within the II Corps' zone of action.)

2) Subsequently, continuation of the operation toward the edge of the Chiapovano valley.

The entire operation depended upon crossing the Isonzo; all preparations therefore had to arrange the deployment of the forces so as to make that crossing possible.

* * *

Deployed on the right bank of the Isonzo between Ronzina and Anhovo over an initial front of approximately eight kilometers, the XXIV Corps, upon reaching the rim of the Vrh basin, would occupy a front of four kilometers.

The attack would therefore initially become denser as it advanced, and the greatest concentration would occur on the left, where an initial front of four kilometers—Ronzina to Canale—would correspond to a final front of barely one kilometer—Semmer and Point 600. The plan regarded this condition as favorable, because the left wing would have forces readily at hand both to continue toward the Ossoinca and to assist, along the rim of the Vrh basin, in the attack on the Kuk (711) and the Jelenik. Moreover, the attack terrain on the left was easier.

The commander of the XXIV Corps had planned the construction of six bridges and several footbridges, in case only some of them could actually be built under the enemy's immediate observation.

According to the plan, the assault columns were to be—and in fact were—disposed along the riverbank in the small valleys descending toward the Isonzo, so that they could flow toward the nearest bridges actually completed. Each was to have sufficient strength to begin and continue the attack at least as far as the Vrh basin.

If tactical reasons later required this uniform distribution of forces to be altered, the timely employment of the army-corps reserves could restore the balance.

The northern sector of the front, as far as but excluding Canale, was therefore assigned to the 47th Division, and the sector south of Canale to the 60th.

To establish contact with the II Army Corps, and at that corps' request, the right-hand brigade of the 60th Division was to send two or three battalions across the Piava bridges to support the left of the 3rd Division (II Corps), which felt isolated. Those battalions were to attack Point 747 south of the Jelenik. As I have already said, that point lay within the II Corps' zone of action. By extending its front to Point 747, the 60th Division was somewhat weakened.

On the left, to establish contact with the XXVII Corps, the 47th Division was to send elements from the Fratta, and later from the Ossoinca, toward the Avscek valley.

That valley formed such a strong dividing feature that, had I been required to occupy it, it would have absorbed many troops to no purpose. It therefore had to be kept under constant observation by the

artillery deployment to the rear. In other words, contact between the XXIV and XXVII Corps was to be maintained by the artillery until actual contact could be established toward the head of the Avscek valley.

Once the entire rim of the Vrh basin had been occupied, the infantry was immediately to attack the Oscedrik between the Ossoinca and Point 856, where, according to the Army Command's instructions, we expected to make contact with the II Corps.

"The task of the 47th Division," the plan stated, "will be to push a column toward the Ossoinca as soon as possible, in order to turn the defense that the enemy will certainly organize on the Oscedrik, the eastern rim of the Vrh basin."

To understand this concept clearly, the Vrh basin should be imagined as a triangular bowl. The western rim is the Fratta-Jelenik line, which falls toward the Isonzo. The northern rim is the Ossoinca. The eastern rim is the Oscedrik.

Looking at the basin from the Korada, it seemed evident to me that I could not hold it unless I immediately seized the Oscedrik. The 47th Division therefore had to attack that line of heights by surprise and from the flank, from the direction of the Ossoinca.

Beyond the Oscedrik, other troops were to intervene for the maneuver.

The plan received the approval of the higher authority, and the preparatory phase then began.

2. THE FLANKING ARMY CORPS

Simultaneously with the XXIV Corps' operation, the XXVII Corps to the north was to cross the Isonzo and, in the first phase, seize the positions dominating the Lom di Tolmino, so as to command from there the lower course of the Idria and threaten the positions of Santa Maria and Santa Lucia di Tolmino from the rear. In a second phase, it was also to attack those positions frontally.

The XXVII Corps had been assigned a broad task for which the allotted forces were insufficient. Success by surprise had to be sought, but surprise was itself extremely difficult to achieve because of the

very serious technical difficulties involved in crossing the Isonzo above Ronzina and because the terrain to be traversed was extensive, harsh, and broken in every direction, greatly delaying movement. The Austrians would have had ample time to move their forces from Tolmino to the Lom and parry the blow.

Thus, in practical terms, the operation of the XXVII Corps could serve only to protect the left flank of the XXIV.

The II Army Corps had three divisions in the line and was to attack between the Jelenik and Monte Santo. This corps too had to overcome grave difficulties, no less serious than those facing the other two. It did not, it is true, have to cross the Isonzo; but precisely for that reason the enemy on its front was far better prepared and stronger than before the XXIV and XXVII Corps.

As will become clear from the narrative that follows, the Battle of the Bainsizza proper was developed and won in all its phases by the XXIV Army Corps. Despite their valor, the other army corps played a secondary part because of the difficult conditions confronting their attacks.

The operation conducted by the XXIV Army Corps—from the long, painstaking, silent, and concealed preparation, through the action of the artillery and trench mortars, the construction of the bridges, the crossing of the Isonzo, and the succession of close and rapid infantry maneuvers, to the pursuit across the Bainsizza Plateau—may be cited as an example in treatises on military art. Let it be said without false modesty and for instructional purposes: artistically and militarily, it was perfect. It was the first breakthrough of the Austrian line on our front, and from the artistic and technical point of view it was more perfect than that of October 1918 at Vittorio Veneto, because the latter was disrupted and delayed by the flooding of the Piave. If we derived no advantage from the breakthrough on the Bainsizza, it was because the highest commands did not expect it and did not know how to exploit it (1).

(1) This statement of mine may appear immodest, since I commanded the XXIV Army Corps. But I speak for my troops, not for myself, in the face of an official and unofficial history that ignores the action of that corps. Finally, for instructional purposes, I must seriously draw the attention of students to these events, since readers have hitherto been distracted by tendentious versions.

I therefore believe it deserves to be described even in its details, for which I shall rely chiefly upon the official report of XXIV Army Corps headquarters.

3. THE TERRAIN AND THE ENEMY LINES

In the sector assigned to the XXIV Corps, the Isonzo valley is formed by wooded mountain slopes rising from 300 to 600 meters above the river, which flows deeply enclosed between its banks. Above Aiba, the banks become rocky and sheer above the riverbed.

At the foot of the heights there is a terraced shelf, from a few dozen to several hundred meters wide and from thirty to sixty meters above the river. Several settlements stand upon this shelf, which is cut by small lateral streams, and the land is cultivated with vineyards and orchards. The small transverse valleys of those streams contain a few bends that were used to conceal from view the infantry intended for the attack. Except for these limited hidden corners, however, everything on one side of the valley can be seen perfectly from the other, as though reading an open book. The trees are not enough to conceal men and objects.

During July and August the Isonzo remained at a normal summer low-water level, with a width of twenty to forty-five meters, a current of 2.50 meters per second, and a depth of one to three meters. It was nowhere fordable. Previous observation had already established that only a few hours of rain were sufficient to raise the water level by several meters and increase the speed of the current to more than 3.50 meters per second.

No carriage road descended the valley sides to the river; there were only a few fairly difficult mule tracks. One road descending to Aiba was under construction and was completed precisely in August.

All movements of troops, food, and matériel took place in the parallel Judrio valley, where excellent roads had been built, including one sheltered behind the crest of the heights between the Isonzo and Judrio. All transport and movement by cart therefore halted on the

crest road and continued from there to its destination by hand or on mules.

The Judrio valley was thus the logistical route parallel to our front, allowing us to bring matériel, food, and troops under cover close to the point of employment. From the crest down toward the Isonzo, however, every movement had to use the mule tracks, and these had been carefully screened to conceal such movement from Austrian observation.

When I assumed command of the XXIV Army Corps, the screening of the mule tracks was nearly complete, and the screening of the riverbanks had already been planned. Our pontoniers had already studied the course of the river for the offensive of the previous May.

On the left bank of the Isonzo, the Austrian sentries were either directly on the river or only a short distance from it, so observation of the entire riverbed was immediate and continuous.

Behind the sentries there was a first continuous defensive line, armed with machine guns and rapid-firing light guns, very well positioned to sweep the entire course of the river. Behind this continuous line, halfway up the slope, the Austrians had built a second line serving as a stop line, composed of detached elements concealed by vegetation and branches.

A third, higher line followed the crest from the Fratta, between the Semmer and Kuk 711, as far as the Jelenik.

Each of our divisional headquarters had studied the enemy lines in minute detail and marked on panoramic maps the exact positions of every isolated weapon, known battery, trench element, and hidden machine gun.

The army-corps commander personally spent a full week checking and completing the study of the enemy positions, passing long hours in the trenches with a Bohemian officer, Captain Hlavacek, who had previously fought in the Austrian lines at Canale and therefore knew them perfectly. It was painstaking work that allowed us to locate almost all the hidden, treacherously placed, or concealed weapons on the enemy front. Some weapons nevertheless revealed themselves during the battle that had not been known to our informant; but this

possibility had been foreseen, since several months had already passed since he had left the enemy lines.

The Second Army Command had assigned the 2nd Field Balloon Section to the XXIV Army Corps. Twice a week its commander reported the results of observations made from a tethered balloon that rose to an altitude of 2,500 meters and systematically observed the Bainsizza Plateau.

Army-corps headquarters directed these observations toward establishing precisely the locations of enemy headquarters, reserves, and telephone exchanges through systematic study of the movements of individual men and troop units and of the direction of the telephone lines.

The direction of those lines can be determined by observing the daily inspections made by linemen. If the lines are overhead and the wire exposed, on sunny days they appear as knife-edged flashes racing through space: reflected sunlight reveals the overhead wires as gusts of wind move them.

In this way, and with the assistance of an aircraft squadron, it was possible to locate precisely the telephone exchanges, observation posts, and certain headquarters, as well as the positions of some batteries farther back on the Bainsizza.

All this methodical, analytical, and painstaking investigative work was necessary to ensure the success of the attack. The army-corps commander well remembered that at the Battle of Ortigara a single battery in a cavern had caused the attack on Monte Forno to fail.

So that this experience of war should not be entirely lost, it is well to explain the detail.

At the Battle of Ortigara, the 29th Division was to attack Monte Forno with one of its brigades, which sent one regiment after another into the attack. The difficulties in bringing each regiment into a position from which it could deploy were serious. The first regiment first had to reach a doline halfway between our trenches and the Austrian trenches; to avoid being seen, it had to file its troops through two communication trenches approximately two hundred meters long. In the doline the regiment concentrated with its battalions in line of

columns, one behind the other; from there the battalions went forward to the attack. The second regiment could not begin moving toward the doline until the first regiment had cleared it.

The two regiments could therefore act only at an interval of half an hour.

The entire ground to be crossed and the doline were swept from several directions, but arrangements had been made to neutralize those weapons. More than two kilometers outside the front to be attacked, however, on the left, there was a battery in a cavern on the summit of Monte Colombara. It swept from the flank all the ground before Monte Forno. When the attack began, the first battalion, protected by fog, reached the enemy trenches, but the others were successively stopped by the rapid flanking fire of that medium-caliber battery. The battery itself could not see them, but it had previously registered its fire upon the attack ground.

The commander of the 29th Division had foreseen the action of the Colombara battery and had indicated how it was to be neutralized. Two 65-mm mountain guns were to be emplaced near our front line, about five hundred meters from the battery, so that they could fire directly into its embrasure when it opened fire. At that moment all the battery personnel would be inside the cavern, and the two mountain guns, with a dozen rounds, could put them out of action and silence the battery. As soon as they had fired that burst, the crews of our guns were to withdraw into prepared shelters, leaving the pieces in place. It was a hunting method that had produced good results on other occasions. But on that occasion, without the divisional commander's knowledge, the two mountain guns were judged more necessary with the rest of their battery to accompany the infantry.

In offensive operations against mountain positions prepared for defense, an analytical study of the enemy position, to locate and neutralize every weapon, is indispensable. Preparatory fire conducted under general instructions, however powerful, cannot produce a certain effect.

* * *

Given the disposition of the Austrian lower line, which closely observed the entire course of the river, it was necessary, if the crossing was to be achieved by surprise, to find a way of forcing the enemy to keep their heads down while the bridges were being built and the first troops crossed.

The plan was to achieve this by intense fire from artillery, trench mortars, machine guns, and rifles. Since building bridges under fire is always an uncertain operation, it had to be attempted at several points in the hope of succeeding at some of them.

For this reason, as I have already said, the commander of the XXIV Corps had planned six bridges and two footbridges; over a few of them passed all the troops that carried out the breakthrough.

4. THE DEPLOYMENT FOR BATTLE

The infantry forces of the two divisions of the army corps—the 47th and 60th—available for the opening of the operation were divided among several columns, while divisional and corps reserves were retained (Appendix 1).

On the night when the bridges were to be built, the various groups or columns were to concentrate in folds of ground concealed from enemy view in the small valleys descending to the river. These places had been studied and selected in advance, close to the sites where the bridges were to be constructed; routes had been prepared leading down to the concealed assembly areas and from there to the bridges. Each column had been assigned its own bridge, line of attack, and objective.

* * *

The artillery had been deployed by applying the lessons of three years of world war, adapted to the special conditions of the terrain and to the fire tactics of the Second Army. Above all, however, perfect knowledge of the targets guided the army-corps artillery command in siting the batteries and assigning their missions.

A powerful mass was needed to destroy the enemy defenses, to conduct counterbattery fire—especially to neutralize enemy batteries

capable of firing upon our bridges—and, at the proper moment, to form a curtain of fire that would leave the enemy uncertain as to the point selected for crossing the river. Finally, the artillery had to facilitate the infantry advance.

Certain batteries were also to prevent enemy forces from descending from the Vrh basin toward the river to reinforce the troops defending it.

A deployment of trench mortars was charged with destroying the enemy defenses of the lower line, while a mass of light and medium guns was to accompany the infantry by fire.

Many batteries fired in enfilade along the enemy trenches.

Instead of being echeloned in depth, as experience advised, the batteries were echeloned by altitude. Our lower line near the river was edged with trench mortars; then, successively higher up, other trench mortars and the light and medium guns were emplaced; and finally, high on the crest or immediately behind it, the medium and heavy guns. This very forward deployment made it possible first to exploit the accuracy of fire—especially enfilade fire—and then to continue supporting the infantry by fire during the subsequent phases and beyond the last trench.

Over the course of a month the batteries were emplaced and supplied with ammunition, the work being carried out chiefly at night. At the same time, the positions of enemy observation posts and batteries were studied, registered one by one by our fire, and then left undisturbed. The positions of enemy light guns and machine guns were identified, and the locations of detached defensive elements were fixed precisely. The habits of the troops assigned to defend the various lines were studied, and the task of engaging the different Austrian weapons was distributed among our light batteries. Since it was reasonable to assume that some weapons had escaped our analytical search, several mountain batteries were assigned to engage any weapons that revealed themselves during the advance of our infantry.

The experience of war had taught the commander of the XXIV Army Corps that ordinary artillery observers, intent upon reporting the

results of fire to their batteries, failed to notice new targets appearing in the enemy field during the operation. As a divisional and brigade commander in various actions, he had telephoned the batteries to draw their attention to powerful new enemy targets that had suddenly appeared and were plainly visible. Hence the need to establish special battlefield observers charged solely with reporting to the direct-fire light batteries the appearance of weapons that had escaped the analytical reconnaissance of the preparatory phase. Given the nature and configuration of the two banks of the Isonzo, whereby everything happening on one could be seen perfectly from the other, these arrangements meant that supporting the infantry by fire as far as the rim of the Vrh basin should prove more effective than having guns physically follow the infantry.

In tactics one must never become enamored of any precept. It is possible for light artillery physically to accompany the infantry if all the enemy artillery, emplaced behind cover, conducts indirect fire—that is, if there are no light batteries firing over open sights. In that case the enemy guns cannot easily follow the movement of the attacking troops, especially once those troops have entered among the defensive lines. This is why, in the last war, it became possible for light artillery physically to accompany the infantry. But guns moving among the infantry often fail to see weapons or nests of weapons that suddenly appear to halt the infantry's advance. They do not see them unless they practically run into them; by then the guns are likely to be put out of action before they can fire. It must be remembered that artillery is effective only when in position; while moving, it does not act. In mountains or hilly terrain, where the whole battle can readily be observed at close range, the arrangement suggested here and already applied on the Isonzo is often preferable to having guns physically accompany the infantry.

In broad outline, the artillery fire (1) was to be distributed as follows:

While the bridges were being built, the trench mortars were to open gaps in the lower and middle lines opposite each assault column. Once the infantry had crossed the lower line, the trench mortars and some medium guns were to concentrate on the middle line, while the bulk of

the medium guns and the long-range trench mortars were to fire upon the upper line. The light and medium guns assigned to support the infantry were to engage every obstacle and enemy defense capable of halting or delaying the advance.

(1) The medium and heavy artillery available to the army corps comprised: twenty-four 149 A guns, twelve 149 G guns, eight French 120-mm guns, thirty 105-mm guns, thirty-two heavy field howitzers, eight 149 G howitzers, twenty 280-mm howitzers, four 305-mm howitzers, and sixteen 210-mm mortars.

Once our troops had reached and crossed the upper line, every gun whose position permitted was to converge its fire upon the Vrh basin and beyond it, in order to facilitate the further advance toward the rim of the Bainsizza Plateau.

The divisional field-artillery regiments were to be ready for movement, even and especially by manpower, so that they could advance toward the Vrh basin as soon as the infantry reached it, as in fact occurred.

A battalion of engineer sappers near Canale stood ready, as soon as the first defenses had been overcome, to make temporary repairs to the Canale-Vrh cart road, in order to facilitate the movement of the light artillery.

Finally, the mountain batteries were to reach the rim of the plateau as soon as possible.

* * *

The Second Army Command had formed maneuver artillery groups, two of which—the 6th and 31st—were concerned with the operation of the XXIV Army Corps. They flanked the corps artillery deployment and were ready to converge their fire either upon the ground over which its infantry advanced or upon that of the neighboring army corps, and to engage the most harmful and dangerous enemy batteries (1).

(1) The 6th Group was at Kambresco and consisted of:

12 batteries of 149A guns

8 batteries of 149G guns

These two artillery groups, known as maneuver groups, were under Army Command. During the operation the Army Command reserved the right to grant their fire to army corps upon request or to offer it

when it deemed appropriate, so that their powerful concentration might crush enemy defenses and batteries.

In general terms the usefulness of this employment of artillery is debatable. In certain limited respects it recalls the Artillery Reserve of earlier times; but in this particular case it could be justified by uncertainty as to the point at which we would succeed in breaking through the enemy front. With these maneuver groups, Army Command could hope to reinforce the artillery action of whichever army corps achieved success. For that reason, the maneuver groups should have consisted entirely of long-range guns.

The commander of the XXIV Corps repeatedly requested the assistance of these groups. He counted upon the left-hand group to neutralize, if necessary, the Austrian batteries situated toward the Lom di Tolmino. Those batteries enfiladed the sector of the Isonzo valley between Ronzina and Canale where the bridge construction was being prepared, and they therefore caused him grave concern. But the commander of those Austrian batteries either failed to realize during the battle that he could destroy the newly built bridges or, intent upon obstructing the maneuver of the XXVII Army Corps on the left, judged it more useful to direct his fire upon other targets.

Continuation of the composition of the 6th Group:

3 batteries of 155-mm guns

4 batteries of 120-mm guns

2 batteries of 105-mm guns

3 batteries of 210-mm mortars

The 31st Group was farther south and consisted of:
8 batteries of 149 G guns

8 batteries of 149 A gun

2 batteries of 155-mm gun

4 batteries of 120-mm guns

4 batteries of 105-mm guns

5 batteries of 210-mm mortars

2 batteries of 305-mm mortars

In any event, in my opinion the defects of the maneuver artillery groups were as follows:

They withdrew batteries from the army-corps commands, so that their action became intermittent, contingent, and not harmonized with the army corps' general operation. Because they had registered upon too many targets—twice or three times the number assigned to the artillery of each army corps—their fire was not very accurate, the beaten zone was very broad, and at times their fire became dangerous to our troops approaching the targets precisely when artillery assistance and accuracy were most needed. Alternatively, they had to make large shifts of fire, which involved the same defect.

Moreover, although telephone communications were well organized and the Army Commander had personally attended to making them rapid, some time was lost in obtaining the support of these groups.

Finally, for many men it is not the same thing to use an instrument of their own as to use one belonging to another, especially when that other is a superior.

Their usefulness on certain occasions cannot, however, be excluded.

For my own part, when I commanded an army, I had no opportunity to organize and employ army artillery groups. I therefore believe that the Battle of the Bainsizza provided the only example of such employment.

During the battle several batteries were transferred from the Third Army front to that of the Second Army, in the sector of the XXIV Corps. They provided very little assistance—certainly less than the disruption caused by having to install new batteries after the first phase of the battle, in which artillery plays the principal role, had ended and maneuver beyond the breach had already begun. Before those batteries were emplaced, oriented, and had registered their fire, the opportunity for their intervention had passed. Moreover, the number of rounds to be fired, although large, was limited; even if there had been twice as many batteries, they could not have exceeded the predetermined expenditure of ammunition.

To complete this account of the functions of the artillery, I shall add that I had been assigned a battery of trench mortars firing smoke bombs, with the possible purpose of concealing the bridge-building work from the enemy. I placed it upstream from the bridges so that, if necessary, it could screen them from the Austrian batteries on the Lom di Tolmino. Its services were not required.

5. THE BRIDGES

While the artillerymen prepared the various artillery actions for the different phases of the battle, the pontoniers, through constant and patient labor, prepared the means for crossing the Isonzo.

I had been assigned the 4th Pontoon Battalion, consisting of the 5th, 8th, and 14th Companies.

Each operating company was assigned an auxiliary company to assist in transporting the matériel.

Our pontoniers possess ancient and glorious traditions, together with noble pride and esprit de corps.

Most of them are boatmen of marvelous skill, handling a boat with a single oar as delicately as a feather, and taking pleasure in confronting the sudden and unforeseen difficulties that rivers present during the construction of a bridge.

Boatmen from the Po Valley were taken by Alessandro Farnese, Ambrogio Spinola, and other commanders to build bridges in the wars of Flanders, for the glory of the King of Spain.

In October 1918 they astonished British engineer officers while crossing the flooded Piave at the Grave di Papadopoli during the Battle of Vittorio Veneto.

Although the least difficult sites had been chosen for bridge construction, extremely serious technical difficulties remained. Every officer and noncommissioned officer had visited the ground to study how they could be overcome without arousing enemy suspicion or attention.

For various technical reasons that need not be recalled, it was

indispensable to use the ordinary wooden bridging matériel of the bridge trains.

At night, one by one and in the deepest silence, the large, heavy pontoons descended the steep mule tracks mounted on two-wheeled carts with solid rubber tires. On reaching the riverbank opposite the selected bridge sites, they were progressively screened and hidden behind the ruins of houses and beneath the small railway and road bridges following the river. At each site twice the quantity of matériel required for one bridge was assembled.

Lighter materials for footbridges had also been brought forward. Everything had been foreseen, including a method for stopping floating mines that the enemy might release into the river at Tolmino.

Yet while all this work was being carried out, and as they brought the boats down to the riverbank, the pontoniers could not persuade themselves that it would be possible to build bridges in front of an enemy who watched the whole surface of the water from trenches only a few dozen meters away on the opposite bank.

"Surely," they thought, "the Austrians will not let us put the boats into the water."

When the commander of the XXIV Corps learned of this particular state of mind among the pontoniers, he assembled several of their detachments early one morning near Liga. First he spoke to the soldiers individually in their respective dialects. Most were boatmen from the Po, Adige, Ticino, and Adda; a few came from the Arno and Tiber, and some were Ligurians.

He then addressed them collectively, approximately as follows:

"All of you have been boatmen from father to son for dozens of generations. Two thousand years ago your most distant forefathers were boatmen like you, in the same places where you were born, and Julius Caesar took them with him into Gaul to build bridges over the Rhine. In this way he was able to conquer Germany and carry Latin civilization there.

"And when Napoleon crossed the Danube at the island of Lobau a hundred years ago, he took the pontoniers of the Po Valley with him; those men were your great-grandfathers.

“These are the two most memorable river crossings in history, and it was your ancestors who prepared them by building the bridges for the victorious armies.

“Will you not know how to build bridges over the Isonzo?

“I know what troubles you. You see the Austrians fifty or a hundred meters away watching the river, and it seems impossible that they will allow you to launch the boats, anchor them, and perform all the other operations requiring at least an hour. But I have good batteries of trench mortars and guns and many machine guns. While you build the bridges, I shall make the Austrians keep their heads down and remain hidden, so that they will not even dare look while you are building them.”

“And we shall build the bridges,” they replied.

I believe this was the only occasion during the war when the commander of the XXIV Corps addressed a body of troops.

The commander of a large formation should avoid making speeches to the troops. He should leave that task to company and battalion commanders and, on great occasions, to regimental or brigade commanders. A rare order of the day will make the troops feel the will and strength of the commander of a large formation better than any speech.

But at grave or difficult moments, during retreats, or in dangerous or important places in the front line, his appearance alone will be enough to relieve the troops or subordinate commanders from the sense of isolation that is so profound and unnerving at the most difficult moments and amid grave dangers. The prestige of command at such moments is unlimited, just as its responsibility is unlimited. A few brief phrases expressing confidence and strength, or a few paternal words according to the occasion, will rapidly circulate across the battlefield or through the trenches and restore vigor and faith to the troops.

CHAPTER VI

THE BATTLE

1. INTRODUCTION

In the following pages I shall describe the most interesting part of the Battle of the Bainsizza: the operation of the XXIV Army Corps. I shall give an analytical account of the movements and actions of regiments and, at times, even of battalions, ordered by army-corps headquarters as the offensive unfolded.

To break down the enemy defensive zone, it was necessary to employ the forces available at the various moments of the offensive, now in one direction and now in another, as breakthrough troops and as maneuver troops; as the saying goes, they had to sing and carry the cross. Some pages of the narrative may therefore seem heavy, but I wish to show clearly the readiness and ease with which our infantry maneuvered, and to disprove certain authoritative voices that have asserted our infantry did not know how to maneuver. Anyone making such assertions must have seen the war only through a telescope.

At the Battle of the Bainsizza, one army corps, through the patient and tenacious labor of its brave and battle-hardened troops, succeeded in forcing the enemy defensive zone, reaching open space for maneuver, and opening the way for a neighboring army corps. But then everything stopped, because the battle plan conceived by the highest commands contemplated no further purpose, possessed no strategic aim, and had therefore made no provision for the forces required to go beyond.

Compare it with the Austro-German plan for the Battle of Caporetto —a comparison that, after final victory, we can make with heads held high and for instruction. In that plan one sees the choice of an offensive axis of great strategic value, knowledge of our lines of weakness, and the concentration and deployment of sufficient forces to achieve the full development of strategic victory. At Caporetto, the directing will of the Austro-German Fourteenth Army Command, following the original offensive plan, guided the breakthrough, the

principal tactical maneuver, and the movement of the masses; movements were therefore ordered by army corps. In the Battle of the Bainsizza, by contrast, XXIV Army Corps headquarters ordered movements and actions by its regiments and even its battalions as the development of the operation required, while always maintaining the offensive along the lines of action set forth in its attack plan.

At Caporetto the Austro-German Fourteenth Army Command held the pulse of the battle and directed it. On the Bainsizza, an army-corps commander directed the battle within his limited attack zone, while the entire rest of the front remained motionless.

2. OPENING OF THE OPERATION (1)

In its operational order, the Second Army Command standardized the action of its army corps during the first phase, up to the construction of the bridges. Once a day N had been fixed for bridge construction, the artillery was to begin its action on day N-2.

(1) When the following pages were written, the author did not know precisely what troop movements the Austro-Hungarians had made to oppose the advance of the XXIV Army Corps. He therefore does not take them into account. The narrative of the battle will thus remain closer to the way the action actually appeared as it unfolded.

The 19th of August was day N; the operation therefore began on 17 August.

On that day the XXIV Army Corps moved its headquarters to Monte Kal, from which the whole battlefield of the XXIV Corps and the two flanking army corps could be seen, between the Lom di Tolmino and the Vodice.

Every command within its own sphere of action must place itself in a position to follow the battle through all its phases and employ every means it considers necessary to learn of each event immediately, without burdening the troop commands that are directing and conducting the action.

I have seen troop commanders more troubled by the continual insistence of higher headquarters, which demanded news of the fighting, than by the enemy. Reporting then became their principal task.

A commander conducting an attack must have no concern other than the action itself. A headquarters that wishes to know how the attack is developing must put itself in a position to see and learn without creating additional burdens for the man who bears the gravest responsibility of all: leading a brigade, regiment, or battalion into the attack. Nor is it difficult to learn the details of a battle's development when, as on our Carso and Isonzo front, the action takes place at no great distance under the eyes of the headquarters themselves, their observers, and the ground and aerial observers of the artillery.

Knowledge of the situation at every moment of the battle is not needed merely to satisfy one's anxious curiosity, calm one's own nerves, or keep those of higher headquarters calm by reporting successes and mitigating or concealing reverses, which is of no importance. It is needed in order to dominate and direct the battle toward an objective. That objective is not the scholastic one of rigidly executing a predetermined plan, but the single, constant, final purpose of battle: the destruction of the enemy forces—the greatest possible destruction of those forces, even beyond one's own zone of action. The battle may therefore counsel a partial or radical modification of the original guiding idea, or the abandonment of the initial operational plan in favor of a new one.

At 2:00 p.m. fire began against the enemy's nerve centers—observation posts, headquarters, and so forth—and continued throughout the afternoon. This was a prescribed operation that had at times produced notable results against observation posts.

During the afternoon the infantry began moving unseen along the mule tracks into the assembly areas.

During the night of 17-18 August, several batteries fired projectiles filled with special liquids into designated localities housing the enemy reserves.

3. THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH OF AUGUST

At precisely 6:30 a.m. on the 18th, every battery and every trench mortar opened fire simultaneously from all sides. Only in the

afternoon did the enemy recover from the surprise and begin firing vigorously; but he was disoriented, and his fire proved ineffective.

The bombardment continued with extreme violence throughout the day. The whole funnel of the Isonzo valley resembled one long smoking crater. There were two pauses in the fire, one during the morning and the other in the afternoon, to inspect its effects. Through the dense haze, broad gaps could be glimpsed in the wire before the enemy's lower line, and large stretches of trench appeared destroyed and overturned.

At 10:00 p.m., beneath the trajectories of bombs, shells, and shrapnel and under the bursts of machine-gun fire, construction of the bridges began.

Part of the artillery and the long-range trench mortars then shifted their fire upward to prevent the enemy from sending reinforcements into the Vrh basin and from there toward the river.

Under the protection of the fire, the pontoniers continued their work. At every bridge, an officer from army-corps headquarters specially assigned there kept the commander informed of the various phases of the operation.

The beams of the enemy searchlights seeking the bridge sites were neutralized by our more powerful beams, previously positioned upstream and downstream after various experiments, so that the pontoniers worked in darkness.

From time to time, however, the enemy illuminated portions of the water with flares. Whenever this occurred, all our machine guns opened extremely rapid fire and the trench mortars forced the enemy observers to remain hidden, so that they did not dare look toward the river.

Artillery fire continued in the same manner throughout the night. From time to time powerful concentrations were directed upon the settlements of Canale, Pecno di Canale, and Loga to break any possible enemy resistance to our crossing. Whenever an enemy searchlight appeared on Na Gradu, the light guns immediately suppressed it.

By 2:00 a.m. on the 19th, the 47th Division had built three bridges: A at Loga, B at Aiba, and C at Bodrez, and the crossing of the 47th

Division's Bersaglieri began at once. Before the bridges were complete, however, the advance guards of the regimental assault detachments had already been ferried across the river.

Bridge A was immediately handed over to the XXVII Corps on our left.

By dawn the two brigades of the 47th Division had crossed the river.

On the front of the 60th Division, enemy fire allowed only Bridge F at Anhovo and two footbridges to be built; four battalions crossed over them. Two other battalions crossed over the Piava bridges to establish contact with the II Army Corps and to join the 3rd Division of that corps in attacking Point 747.

Daylight was now breaking. This was the most dangerous moment, because the enemy would see the bridges and could destroy them. Moreover, the artillerymen and observers were bound to be tired after the work of the preceding day and night. Anticipating this, the commander of the XXIV Corps had arranged reliefs for the artillery personnel so that everyone might obtain some rest. At 4:30 a.m., however, from the observation post on Monte Kal, he sounded the alarm for the artillery command and its observers. He remembered only too well several of our attacks repulsed at dawn at San Martino del Carso in October 1915 because an exhausted artillery observer had not been ready to call down battery fire upon plainly visible enemy troops coming forward to counterattack. Thus the artillery continued its work, and its action was providential for the battalions of the 60th Division that had crossed the Isonzo.

In the early hours of the morning, after learning that the river crossing had begun and was proceeding successfully, Army Command placed the Elba Brigade of the 66th Division at the disposal of the XXIV Corps and ordered the 66th Division to move into the San Jacob area, while remaining under the tactical control of Army Command.

At sunrise the situation was as follows: the 47th Division had crossed and was advancing; the 60th had been halted and remained stationary.

After overcoming the strongest resistance encountered following the river crossing and bypassing several small enemy defenses that fell

soon afterward, the troops of the 47th Division began climbing the steep slope toward the Fratta-Semmer ridge, which they reached in the afternoon.

It had been agreed that if the XXIV Corps succeeded in building several bridges while the XXVII Corps failed to build any, Bridge A would be handed over to the latter. This occurred, and the Trapani Brigade crossed it early in the morning. The regiment crossing first was to move to the left upstream, protected by the Bersaglieri of the 5th Brigade; it was then to separate from the Bersaglieri and deploy to attack one of the objectives of the XXVII Army Corps, Na Gradu. Instead, drawn into the Bersaglieri's action, it deployed on their left and prolonged their line from the foot of the Fratta as far as Auzza.

The mountain artillery of the 47th Division immediately followed the infantry. Two sections took position on the Loga and Bodrez spurs, and two batteries climbed the Fratta and the Semmer, welcomed by the applause of the Bersaglieri. Arrangements were immediately begun for the crossing of the field batteries.

The 60th Division, however, remained halted. Its left wing before Canale waited under cover for completion of the bridge, still tenaciously obstructed by light guns and several Austrian machine guns extremely well protected and concealed among the ruins of the town—some in caverns, others in cellars as much as seventy meters below the level of the town. Even bombardment by medium and heavy guns could not have silenced them.

The central column of the 60th Division—two battalions of the 257th Infantry—crossed Footbridge No. 2 under violent machine-gun fire, then had to concentrate on the left bank and halt with inadequate cover beneath the fire of Austrian machine guns lining the escarpment above the bank. Meanwhile the footbridge was destroyed by enemy artillery, leaving those troops in a difficult position. Enemy counterattacks, which they could not have resisted, had to be prevented; this became the task of our light guns.

Four other battalions that had crossed the river—two over Footbridge No. 3 and two over the Piava bridges—were likewise immobilized, although under less serious conditions. The battalions

that had crossed at Piava were connected on their right with the 3rd Division of the II Corps, which was also motionless.

The situation had to be resolved as quickly as possible.

From the observation post on Monte Kal, the army-corps commander followed the operation step by step and ordered General Fara to turn Canale and attack it from upstream with two battalions of the 1st Bersaglieri Brigade.

This small lateral maneuver—and another later ordered to turn Morsko from Canale—involved no danger. It took place under the protection of our artillery; no Austrian attack descending from the Vrh basin could strike it in the flank without remaining under our artillery fire throughout the operation. Nor could our troops maneuvering against the flank be struck by Austrian artillery, which feared hitting its own infantry.

Above all, nothing was being risked because the maneuver was brief and unexpected in a war in which it occurred to no one to exploit the fleeting favorable situations that arose in battle by maneuvering.

It was certainly necessary to have one's hand on the pulse of the battle and therefore to see its various aspects in order to order those brief tactical actions at a glance. But success could be regarded as certain, because no one was prepared to meet tactical maneuver, whether on a small or large scale. Thus, before the Austrians became aware of our actions, understood their intention and scope, prepared the means to oppose them, issued the necessary orders, and so forth, the actions were already over.

This maneuver, immediately understood and executed with speed and generosity by two battalions of the 12th Bersaglieri and assisted by a brief but extremely violent artillery concentration, enabled us to seize the town in the early evening and caused the surviving defenders to surrender.

Once Canale had fallen, work immediately began on Bridges D at Canale and E at Morsko. The commander of the XXIV Corps then ordered the 60th Division headquarters to send three battalions across at Canale during the night, so that the following morning they could turn Morsko by an analogous maneuver. Enemy resistance there

remained vigorous and continued to paralyze the action of the 60th Division.

Meanwhile, because the 47th Division had all its troops engaged, XXIV Corps headquarters placed at its disposal the 6th Bersaglieri Regiment, which had been in corps reserve, and ordered the 262nd Infantry of the Elba Brigade, 66th Division, to descend from the heights of Kambresco to the bank of the Isonzo, so that it would be available in reserve and ready to cross.

On the right, the II Army Corps had been unable to overcome the enemy resistance or even to reach the nearest enemy trenches.

On the left, the XXVII Army Corps had crossed the Isonzo with part of its troops but was struggling amid grave difficulties.

After the Canale bridge had been built, the Second Army Command decided that Bridge B should also be handed over to the XXVII Corps. Bridges A and B thus came entirely under the XXVII Corps, while Bridges C, D, E, and F remained with the XXIV.

The war communiqué for that day, 19 August, made no mention of the XXIV Corps' operation.

4. THE TWENTIETH OF AUGUST

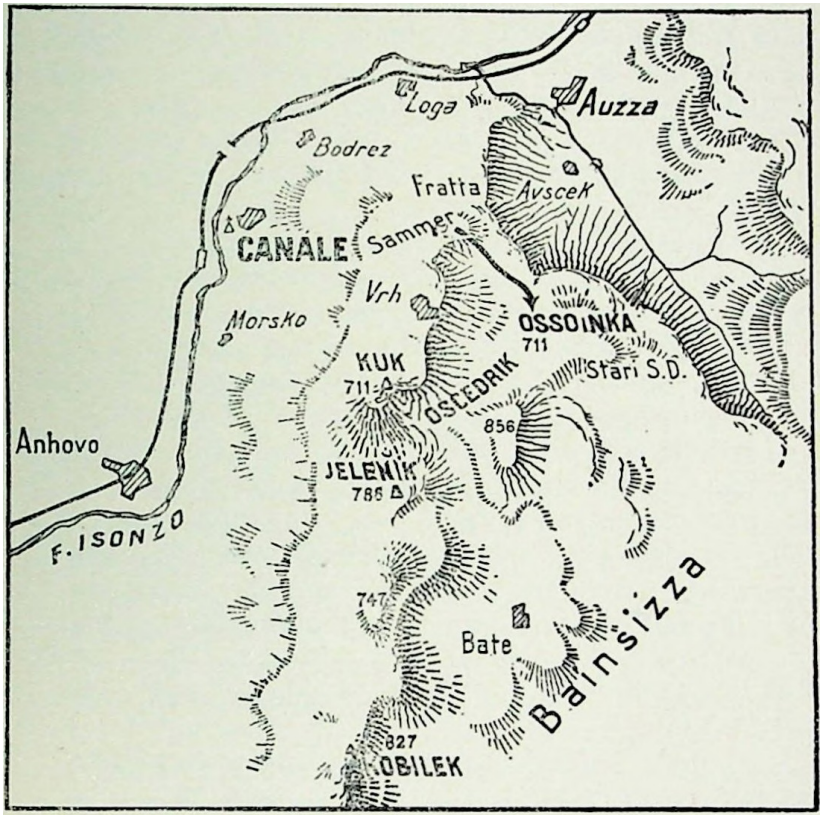
On the morning of 20 August, because of the difficulties encountered by the 60th Division, the XXIV Army Corps was deployed in echelon: the left, the 47th Division, was forward on the rim of the Vrh basin; the right, the 60th Division, remained behind, still engaged in crossing the Isonzo over the bridges at Canale and Morsko. But since the orders of XXIV Corps headquarters were already being executed, I was certain that during the day the 60th Division too would free itself from the crossing operation and bring its left wing up to the Vrh basin.

The disorderly fire of the enemy artillery showed that it was disoriented. Moreover, information obtained from prisoners indicated that the opportunity was favorable, that we had to dare and immediately exploit the surprise.

Everything favored the original plan: to advance the left wing by way of the Ossoinca in order to turn the Oscedrik, without possession of which the Vrh basin could not be held, and from which the Jelenik and all the Austrian defensive lines facing the II Army Corps could be turned.

This operation departed from Army Command's orders, but it had been envisaged in the XXIV Corps' attack plan and, all things considered, involved no danger while offering the possibility of broad results.

THE FLANK ATTACK ON THE OSCEDRIK



The commander of the XXIV Corps assigned the 262nd Regiment of the Elba Brigade to the 47th Division. In accordance with orders received the previous day, that regiment was descending on 20 August from the heights of the right bank toward the Isonzo. It was assigned so that General Fara could be certain of possessing sufficient forces, and he was informed that the remainder of the Elba Brigade would follow the 262nd.

Similarly, in order to give greater vigor to the action of the 60th Division, whose central column had suffered heavy losses, its own 159th Regiment, then in army-corps reserve, was assigned to it. Since the entire 66th Division had now joined the XXIV Corps, the 277th Regiment of the Vicenza Brigade, which had already been ordered to descend from the heights on the right bank to the Isonzo, was also placed at the disposal of the 60th. This regiment was to join the other columns of the 60th Division in the attack on the Jelenik.

On that day the left wing of the 47th Division, still isolated in the Vrh basin, did not advance. During the day, however, the entire 1st Bersaglieri Brigade moved onto the rim of the Vrh basin between the Semmer and Kuk 711. That same evening the 262nd Infantry Regiment of the Elba Brigade was ready near the Loga bridges.

The commander of the XXIV Corps wished the 5th Bersaglieri Brigade to march immediately by way of the Ossoinca to envelop the Oscedrik and arrive before the Austrian reserves, foreseeing that every delay would later confront us with strong resistance.

There was no cause for concern in this maneuver either, because the advance of the 5th Bersaglieri Brigade toward the Ossoinca was to take place between the Avscek valley and the Vrh basin.

The Avscek valley was easily covered by our artillery, formidably deployed on the heights of the right bank of the Isonzo. The Austrians had only patrols in the wooded bottom of the valley. To bring in the troops required and place them in a position to attack the left flank of the 5th Bersaglieri Brigade, they would have needed several days; while climbing the side of the valley, they would have given our artillery ample time to smash their attack. It was therefore sufficient

for the 5th Bersaglieri Brigade to leave two companies behind on the left to secure the march and operation of the column.

During its march toward the Ossoinca and Oscedrik, it likewise had no need to fear an attack on its right flank through the Vrh basin, because such an attack would have had to pass, always under our artillery fire, between the slopes of the Oscedrik and the 1st Bersaglieri Brigade deployed along the Semmer-Kuk sector.

Finally, the 262nd Infantry Regiment, which during 20 August was already ready near the Loga bridges and was to be followed by the 261st, was expected to be ready to fight in the Vrh basin on the following morning. Sufficient forces were therefore immediately at hand to carry out the operation.

But General Fara and General Boriani, commander of the 5th Bersaglieri Brigade—excellent generals in whom the army-corps commander had the utmost confidence—did not yet feel strong enough for such a bold operation. Moreover, the Bersaglieri needed to recover their breath, and he therefore did not insist. In operations of such daring, the executor must be thoroughly convinced of their success so that he carries them out without hesitation and with impetus; otherwise they fail.

During that day the 60th Division executed the order issued on the preceding evening, immediately after completion of the Canale bridge: to send three battalions of its left wing across at Canale and turn Morsko, so that all its troops could cross the Isonzo and push their columns toward the Vrh basin. By the evening of the 20th it had reached an elevation of approximately four to five hundred meters, clearing the left-bank slope of enemy groups armed with machine guns.

The concern of XXIV Corps headquarters was now to bring fresh troops within reach of the front lines, since it was reasonable to suppose that enemy reserves were beginning to arrive on the Bainsizza and would dispute our occupation of the Oscedrik and Jelenik.

The headquarters of the Elba Brigade with the 261st Regiment, and the headquarters of the Vicenza Brigade with the 278th and 279th

Regiments, had therefore descended or were descending toward the right bank of the Isonzo.

To relieve the 47th Division headquarters of all concern—its troops were now approximately one march from the Isonzo—the Elba Brigade headquarters and its remaining regiment were placed at its disposal. Additional troops were immediately requested from Army Command, with the observation that, as had been foreseen, the difficulties of feeding the battle in time were increasing.

As army-corps headquarters had pointed out earlier, the brigades placed successively at its disposal began from the floor of the Judrio valley. They therefore had to make an entire long march up to the crest between the Judrio and the Isonzo, descend to the Isonzo, and climb again to the Fratta-Semmer-Kuk-Jelenik line from which they were to enter action. Such marches, over congested roads and with great changes in elevation, exhausted the troops and reduced their fighting power. If the needs of the operation required their immediate employment, it would be impossible to grant them suitable rest before launching them into the pursuit.

To remedy this disadvantage, it was requested that at least one brigade be transported by motor truck to the Cambresco-Korada ridge line.

The Army Commander approved and arranged for the Grosseto Brigade to be sent by motor truck to Cambresco on the following day.

During that day the XXVII Corps had made little progress, while the II Corps remained in its positions. Its advance depended upon the XXIV Corps' capture of the Jelenik and Point 747. The commander of the II Corps asked his colleague of the XXIV to attack the Jelenik immediately, but the opportune moment had not yet arrived.

The war communiqué of 20 August still made no mention of the action of the XXIV Army Corps.

5. THE TWENTY-FIRST OF AUGUST

The 47th Division now had a sufficient body of troops on the rim of the Vrh basin between the Semmer and the Fratta—the 5th and 1st

Bersaglieri Brigades, the Tonale and Pasubio Alpine battalions, and the Elba Brigade—to launch an attack upon the wooded mass of the Oscedrik. Its contact with the 60th Division on the left bank of the Isonzo had been established. The troops of the latter, after repairing the bridge and footbridges at Morsko, had all crossed to the left bank except two battalions of the 257th Regiment, Tortona Brigade, which had suffered heavy losses on the first day and had been withdrawn by order of the army-corps commander to the right bank of the Isonzo to rest and rebuild. Reinforced, as I have said, by the 277th Infantry Regiment, the 60th Division now faced no serious obstacle to reaching the rim of the plateau.

The operation could therefore proceed harmoniously along the whole front. The army-corps commander accordingly ordered the 47th Division to attack the Oscedrik in accordance with the orders already issued and with the original plan.

Preceded by a sound artillery preparation, the 5th Bersaglieri Brigade moved to the attack at about 7:30 a.m. Overcoming strong resistance, it followed the northern edge of the Vrh basin, its left flank protected by the Tonale and Pasubio Alpine battalions. During the morning it reached Point 716 on the Oscedrik and sent patrols toward Point 856, which was found already occupied by the enemy.

At the same time, the 1st Bersaglieri Brigade left the Semmer, crossed the Vrh basin, and reached the western slopes of the wooded Oscedrik massif.

The 60th Division continued its advance. At 2:00 p.m., four battalions of the Tortona Brigade—the 258th Infantry and one battalion of the 257th—reached Kuk 711 and occupied it, maintaining contact to the right rear with the 159th Infantry of the Milano Brigade, which was advancing toward the Jelenik.

The right of the division, the 160th Infantry, was still halted before Lastivnica. It formed part of the same system as the troops of the II Corps, whose advance now remained dependent upon the capture of the Jelenik and Point 747 by the XXIV Army Corps.

In the evening the Grosseto Brigade, 237th and 238th Infantry, arrived at Cambresco by motor truck and was sent down to the right bank of the Isonzo.

During the night, the first field guns crossed the Isonzo and began climbing the steep Canale-Vrh mule track.

Army Command informed XXIV Corps headquarters that on the 22nd it would insert the XIV Army Corps into the Avscek valley between the XXVII and XXIV Corps, while leaving the latter's northern boundary unchanged.

The II Corps had not moved. Its commander repeated by telephone his request that the Jelenik and Point 747 be attacked; he had to be told that on the following day we would have the necessary forces in the Vrh basin and would then open the door for him.

The war communiqué of 21 August likewise made no mention of the XXIV Corps' operation.

6. THE TWENTY-SECOND OF AUGUST: THE DECISIVE DAY

During the night the retreating Austrian artillery had abandoned its positions on the Isonzo.

Perfect silence reigned in the valley. Not a trumpet call, not the neighing of a horse, not the sound of a command. Nature and men rested. After so much storm and destruction, a religious silence exalted the soul toward mystical heights of love and peace. Everything passes and leaves in the heart only regret for the burning hour that has been lived.

But at long intervals, the distant rumble of a gun beyond the Lom recalled us to the reality of a struggle not yet ended. Its great distance reminded us that the enemy artillery no longer had eyes with which to select targets in that great furrow carved by the waters of the Isonzo among the geological folds of the Julian Prealps. Every movement of troops as far as the Vrh basin could therefore be carried out by daylight in complete safety from any surprise by enemy fire.

Prepared by a powerful concentration of artillery fire, the frontal and flanking attack upon the Oscedrik advanced energetically during

the morning. Each Bersaglieri brigade was reinforced by a regiment of the Elba Brigade. The 278th Infantry of the Vicenza Brigade remained in reserve at the Semmer. The Grosseto Brigade was climbing from the Isonzo toward the Semmer.

The 47th Division succeeded once in seizing the summit of the Oscedrik, Point 856, but lost it shortly afterward to a counterattack by enemy reserves favored by terrain bristling with rocks, broken by fissures and deep holes, and covered in extremely dense vegetation. Lost once, immediately retaken in furious hand-to-hand fighting, and lost again, the summit of the Oscedrik was in enemy hands at 2:30 p.m.

I then ordered the commander of the 47th Division to attack the Oscedrik again, employing the Tonale and Pasubio Alpine battalions. Several hours were required for those battalions to approach and deploy for the attack.

The 60th Division now had four battalions of the Tortona Brigade and the entire 279th Infantry of the Vicenza Brigade on Kuk 711. The 159th Infantry was climbing the steep slope of the Jelenik.

On the Semmer was the brave General Tisi, commander of the Elba Brigade, whose regiments were reinforcing the two Bersaglieri brigades. Through General Fara, beside whom Tisi was stationed, the commander of the XXIV Army Corps ordered him to attack the Jelenik along the ridge with the 279th Infantry and the four battalions of the Tortona Brigade. At the same time, the fire of numerous batteries was concentrated upon the Jelenik.

The order was immediately understood, and the first phase of the maneuver—the concentration—began. It unfolded under the eyes of the army-corps commander, who foresaw both its development and the following phase. The day was decisive, and naturally he was pressed by the impatient desire to reach quickly the objectives that might open the road to a great victory for the Second Army.

He thought: “There is the concentration. The Austrian artillery now has no observation post from which to see it and cannot disturb it. It will take an hour and a half, no less; infantrymen move slowly over

broken and uneven ground and cannot go faster. Then will come the deployment and the attack. By 6:00 p.m. the Jelenik can be ours."

Despite his impatience, the army-corps commander admired the quick and easy movements of those troops, which reflected the serenity of their commander, Brigadier General Tisi. They seemed to maneuver cheerfully as though on a parade ground.

Could infantry other than Italian maneuver in this fashion at such a moment, after having remained motionless for months on end, bogged down in muddy trenches? Could it so quickly recover such freedom of movement after many months of locomotor ataxia? In various wars I have seen the infantry of the principal European, Asian, and American nations, but I believe that none of them—not even the French, who most nearly resemble ours in quickness of perception, agility, and ease of movement—could have carried out that maneuver better or more promptly under analogous circumstances.

I have allowed myself this brief pause in the narrative to point out how unfounded is the assertion that our infantry did not know how to maneuver. General Tisi's maneuver, that of the two battalions of the 12th Bersaglieri in turning Canale on 19 August, and that of the 258th Infantry in turning Morsko on 20 August provide the best refutation.

If I insist upon this, it is not so much to let a little historical justice dawn as to put ourselves on guard against a state of mind easily found among troop commanders throughout the world. They justify themselves and the failure of the orders they issue by attributing defects and shortcomings to their troops. In this way they exercise no control over their own actions and persist in erroneous attack plans and old, overused tactical methods whose every phase is known to the enemy from the first cannon shots. If, instead, they were persuaded that the troops do what they can and cannot do more, they would become convinced of their own errors. Not only would justice be respected—which is of no great importance in war—but matters would go better.

It is necessary, however, to bring the real defects of the troops into proper light, because every body of troops possesses the qualities and defects of its nation.

Ours, as I have said, possess a quick perception of the situation and an immediate collective vision or sensation of success or failure; but this quality may also cause grave dangers.

Because of this quick collective intuition among our troops, already observed, if I am not mistaken, by Machiavelli at the Battle of Fornovo, it is necessary to give them security in their rear.

All troops attacked from behind give way sooner or later; but ours, just as they feel exaltation before any others in favorable situations, sense danger immediately in adverse situations and allow less time for taking the indispensable measures needed to parry the blow.

The quick perception of our troops may therefore be dangerous. Our troop commanders must not forget this and must never neglect security measures. Without offending anyone, I can say that during the last war we often forgot it. Moreover, our troops must be trained to meet attacks from the rear.

The phases of the attack upon the Jelenik unfolded brilliantly before the eyes of His Majesty the King, who watched the action from the observation post on Monte Kal, and saw numerous large groups of prisoners descending from the ridge toward the Isonzo (1). Our Sovereign sensed the impatience of the XXIV Corps commander and, in calm and confident words, expressed his satisfaction with the maneuver of our troops.

(1) During that action, shortly before His Majesty the King arrived, General Cadorna came to my observation post. The attack upon the Oscedrik was then in progress, and the attack upon the Jelenik was beginning. Two Austrian batteries, which I was engaging with counterbattery fire, were firing on the Oscedrik. The Chief of the Army General Staff immediately understood that my troops were already near the summit of that mountain and expressed surprise that the Austrians had allowed me to go so far. I replied by referring to my enveloping maneuver and added that on the following day I would open the door completely for the II Army Corps so that together we might march toward the Chiapovano valley. After these words he left the observation post, saying: "Fine days, those days of maneuver!"

The commander of the XXIV Corps then had a clear vision of the possibility of a great success for our arms. Once the Jelenik and Oscedrik fell, a considerable sector of the Austrian line south of the Jelenik would also have to fall. Several times during the two preceding days he had telephoned the commander of the II Army Corps to be patient, saying that he would go and open the door for him. What he

had promised was now taking place, and it seemed to him that an equal opportunity existed to extend freedom of maneuver to the troops south of the II Corps. All roads would then be open, and the army could march beyond the Chiapovano basin.

Thus, while His Majesty the King watched the action, the army-corps commander had the opportunity to reason beside him with his excellent chief of staff, Colonel Angelo Tua, about the possibility that was opening for the following days: advancing toward and crossing the Chiapovano valley. If this favorable possibility presented itself, they must not halt at the bottom of the valley but proceed immediately to occupy the Lokve defile. On the following day he spoke in the same sense by telephone to General Fara and also to the Army Commander, General Capello.

At 5:00 p.m. the Jelenik was in our hands, and at 6:00 p.m. the neighboring Point 747 was also taken.

The 60th Division was immediately ordered to advance toward Bate in order to close the Vrh basin and turn the enemy lines facing the II Corps.

Through General Tisi's action, the XXIV Army Corps had opened the door for the II Army Corps, because the three Austrian trench lines joining near the Jelenik had now been turned.

Having completed his action, the brave and serene General Tisi resumed his post at the Semmer, awaiting the opportunity to reunite his Elba Brigade. The troops temporarily under his command thus returned to the 60th Division.

In obedience to higher instructions, arrangements had to be made to relieve the two Bersaglieri brigades and withdraw them to the left bank of the Isonzo for rest and reorganization.

That evening the Army Commander placed the Ravenna Brigade, 37th and 38th Infantry, at the disposal of the XXIV Corps so that, together with the Grosseto Brigade, it could replace the Bersaglieri in the 47th Division.

Once disengaged and made available, the two regiments of the Elba Brigade were to be reunited under General Tisi.

Orders were likewise issued to reconstitute the Vicenza Brigade with its three regiments in the 60th Division.

The XXVII Army Corps remained in its new positions that day.

Toward evening, the left wing of the II Army Corps, the 3rd Division, was able to advance somewhat and occupy the first line of enemy trenches. XXIV Corps headquarters urged those troops to advance farther and quickly relieve its units on the last Austrian trench line before their front between Points 747 and 652, so that the 60th Division might continue its advance on the following day.

But since the left-hand division of the II Corps was not yet able to relieve the 60th Division at Point 747, higher authority required the latter to wait for the neighboring division so as not to leave a gap between the two army corps. General Squillace, who commanded the 60th, was deeply grieved. He sensed that the moment was favorable.

Had he possessed at least one available brigade at that instant, he would have launched it along the road to Bate to cut off the retreat of the Austro-Hungarian forces facing the II Army Corps.

The Second Army Command had not realized that the halt would prevent us from exploiting victory. It was the moment to dare, to advance rapidly, and to flood toward the right with whatever forces were available.

The purpose of battle is not rigidly to execute a predetermined plan, but to inflict the greatest possible damage upon the enemy forces, up to their complete destruction. Knowledge of the situation during the night of 22-23 August could therefore have suggested to the higher commands a modification of their original operational plan, to be put into effect at once. But troops had to be available near the Vrh basin.

The war communiqué of 22 August likewise made no mention of the action of the XXIV Corps.

7. THE TWENTY-THIRD OF AUGUST

Even before the operation to turn the Oscedrik from the south had begun, during the early morning and after repeated attacks, the

Pasubio and Tonale Alpine battalions overcame every enemy resistance. The summit of the Oscedrik returned to our possession, this time definitively.

On that summit, the furious fighting repeatedly sustained by our troops and the Austro-Hungarians had left terrible and painful traces: layers of enemy and Italian dead alternately superimposed, broken and abandoned weapons mingled among them, torn rocks, shattered trees, and severed branches. One could see how many times that summit had been lost and retaken.

To our brave comrades who fought and fell there I direct a reverent and grateful thought; to the enemy let there go the tribute of admiration merited by their valor.

In the afternoon, the troops of the Grosseto Brigade, which had replaced the 5th Bersaglieri Brigade, occupied the heights of Stari San Duha.

On that day the left wing of the II Corps, the 3rd Division, was finally able to advance. It left its old trenches and relieved the troops of the 60th Division in the sector between Points 747 and 652.

With its right thus freed from that sector belonging to the II Corps, the 60th Division was ordered to occupy the woods south of the Oscedrik while maintaining contact to the rear with the 3rd Division of the II Corps. By threatening the Kobilek from the rear, its advance was to open the road for the left-hand division of the II Corps.

Along the entire frontal attack, which had begun on 17 August from Tolmino to the sea, the XXVII and XXIV Army Corps had crossed the Isonzo and advanced. But because of the difficulties encountered in crossing the river, the XXVII Corps had failed to surprise the Lom positions and was soon halted.

The XXIV Corps alone, through a process of disintegration, had broken through every enemy line on its front from the Avscek to the Jelenik and, by turning them, had caused the Austrian lines from the Jelenik to Monte Santo inclusive to fall, opening a gate fifteen kilometers wide.

Up to that moment the principal action had been carried out by the XXIV Army Corps. The battle should now have entered a second phase: maneuver beyond the enemy lines, beyond the breach.

Through the fifteen-kilometer gate opened by the XXIV Corps, the Second Army should have sent the greatest possible number of forces and advanced resolutely toward the Chiapovano valley, with the intention of turning and crossing it and separating the Austrians deployed north of the Ternova Plateau from those to the south, cutting off their retreat toward Ljubljana. Other forces, by a lateral maneuver to the right, could have opened the gate for the rest of the Second Army.

The entire Austrian front on the Isonzo must have felt shaken on that day and the next, and every enemy command must have been anxious. They must have suffered those moments of moral wavering in which weaknesses are easily exploited. The Third Army too should perhaps have attacked on the 23rd in order to profit from those weaknesses. The Supreme Command sensed this, but issued its orders rather late.

I was convinced then, and remain convinced, that on that day the possibility existed of causing Tolmino to fall on one side and the Gorizia amphitheater, the Carso, and Trieste on the other; and, more important still, of causing the Austrians to lose a large part of their batteries and troops.

Having lost the whole of the 23rd in inactivity, it was foreseeable that the Austrians would establish at least a stop line along the rim of the Chiapovano valley, and preparations had to be made to break it. It was probable that the II Army Corps would play the principal part in that operation, because on the right of that corps the heights along the valley rim are less difficult and the valley less deep, and above all because the natural direction of advance of the II Corps' right wing, the 53rd Division, led toward turning the Chiapovano valley (1). The II Corps also had a carriage road at its disposal.

(1) On the 26th, the 53rd Division of the II Army Corps, commanded by General Gonzaga, established itself on the southern rim of the Chiapovano valley. Reporting this to his army-corps commander, Gonzaga asked whether, in accordance with the earlier verbal telephone communication, he was to halt at Caverna, which he already held, or march resolutely along the road to Ternova. That was the road to great victory. The Army

Commander, however, acting in accordance with the Supreme Command's original design, had decided otherwise.

The success of this second phase of the operation depended largely upon speed of action and the decisive impulse that could come only from the will of Army Command, with the consent of the Supreme Command. Had that will existed, all orders would have been issued beforehand both to accelerate the timing and to ensure that the troops required for maneuver were available to the XXIV Corps. The day of the 23rd would not then have been lost while waiting for the II Corps to move onto the Austrian line already evacuated because of the turning maneuver carried out by the XXIV. The 23rd should have been the first day of exploitation.

The lesson we failed to give the Austrians on 23 August was given to us by the Austro-German Fourteenth Army on 24 October of that year.

The tactical habits which led men to believe that an attack could not push its troops beyond the maximum range of the artillery—because, it was said, the infantry would lose the support of its sister arm—may have prevented the higher commands on 22 and 23 August from conceiving the possibility of a lateral or central maneuver. But in my opinion General Capello was a man capable of breaking and overcoming such habits.

I cannot exclude the possibility that during those days he had glimpsed the great opportunities opening before his army. Yet, in my judgment, the original formulation of the battle's strategic concept must have exerted the greater and decisive influence in producing the inactivity of the 23rd. Under that concept, both the Supreme Command and the Second Army Command could regard themselves as satisfied with the results already achieved, which at that time surpassed those obtained in any other battle of our war. But these are only my conjectures.

On the 23rd the war communiqué still made no mention of the action of the XXIV Army Corps.

8. THE TWENTY-FOURTH OF AUGUST

The easy advance of the Grosseto Brigade to Stari San Duha on the preceding day, the precipitous retreat of the Austrians from the Oscedrik, the complete absence of artillery fire, and the fires reported on the Bainsizza were indications of a general Austrian retreat. The commander of the XXIV Corps therefore ordered an early and rapid advance along the entire front toward the Chiapovano basin. The XXIV Army Corps would thus naturally turn the whole Kobilek line and free the front of the II Corps from that obstacle.

The troops were to avoid attacking the difficulties encountered along their route—defended villages, trench elements, and so forth—and were instead to turn them.

Although the 47th Division was farther forward than the flanking troops—the 60th Division and the XIV Army Corps (1)—it was not to delay while awaiting a rectification of the front, but was to move at once and resolutely toward the rim of the Chiapovano basin.

(1) As already stated, on the 22nd the XIV Army Corps had been inserted between the XXIV and XXVII Army Corps.

It was to advance in echelon from the right, keeping its left refused to guard against possible threats from the north.

The 60th Division was to advance so as to extend the line of the 47th Division toward the right, or south, while maintaining a deployment in depth to form a defensive flank on the right between Zgorevnice and Sveto and guard against possible threats from the south.

The refusal of the outer wings of the two divisions for flank protection was necessary because the two flanking army corps—the XIV to the north and the II to the south—were behind, and the advancing XXIV Corps lacked support on its flanks.

These orders had just been issued when the army-corps commander was summoned by the commander of the Second Army to a conference with the other corps commanders. Nothing was concluded, because during the conference news arrived that the 53rd Division, commanded by Gonzaga, had occupied Monte Santo.

There was now nothing to do but advance in every direction. XXIV Corps headquarters therefore supplemented Operational Order No. 9 with the following general instructions:

"The enemy must be pursued and given no respite, so that he cannot reorganize and establish himself in position.

"Given our superiority in forces and the enemy's particular state of disorganization, I again recommend enveloping maneuver rather than persistence in frontal fighting.

"It is my intention to continue the advance rapidly until we reach the northwestern rim of the Chiapovano valley, seize the pass on the road to Lokve, and occupy the flanking heights of Veliki Vrh and Cerni Vrh."

In accordance with the orders received, the troops had resumed their advance decisively, bypassing obstacles so as to overcome by enveloping maneuver the partial but stubborn resistance offered here and there by the enemy.

From the early morning, the 47th Division drove resolutely between Point 757 and the Sleme and occupied Trusnje before nightfall.

After occupying Bate, the 60th Division continued toward the Sleme and reached the line Point 801-Sleme-Point 700-Lohka.

The medium and heavy artillery preceded the infantry advance with its fire, engaging settlements and road junctions.

The mountain batteries accompanied the infantry; the field batteries, which had already surmounted the rugged spurs of the Semmer and Kuk with difficult hauling, followed the infantry and protected it with their fire.

On that occasion I saw two batteries of the 46th Field Artillery gallop into position—perhaps the only such case on the Italian front during the entire war.

During the advance, several Austrian batteries captured in perfect working order were immediately employed against the enemy. The war communiqué of 24 August likewise made no mention of the action of the XXIV Army Corps.

9. THE END OF THE BATTLE

On 25 August the 47th Division was considerably farther forward than the XIV Corps, which followed it along the left side of the Avscek valley; its right was also two kilometers ahead of the troops of the 60th Division. It nevertheless continued its advance, driving on the right toward Point 845 and succeeding on the left in seizing the heights of Point 920, which rise west of the Volnik.

Advancing rapidly and in good order, the 60th Division pushed its troops toward the heights southeast of Breg, where enemy resistance halted them.

The mountain and field batteries continued to support the infantry advance. The medium and heavy artillery, by contrast, had to cease firing and began preparing to move forward.

On that day Army Command placed the Sassari Brigade at the disposal of the XXIV Corps. It was assigned to the 60th Division to replace the Milano Brigade. With the relief of the Milano Brigade, orders were also given to withdraw the Tortona and Elba Brigades.

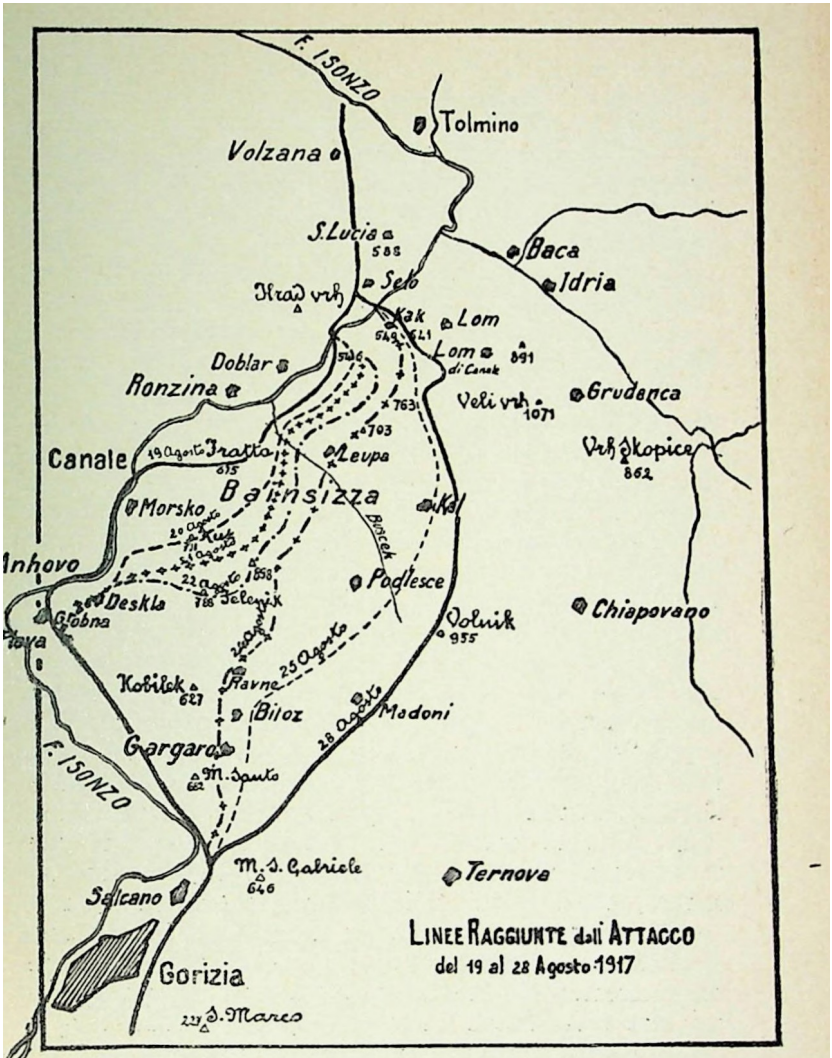
Army-corps headquarters moved to the western slopes of the Ossoinca, where it camped.

During the night, the first medium-caliber batteries crossed to the left bank of the Isonzo.

By the evening of the 25th, with the attainment of the objectives just mentioned, the operations studied in the offensive plan and summarized above were now completed in the same sequence that had been foreseen and planned.

BATTLE OF THE BAINSIZZA

Lines occupied by the XXIV Army Corps on the various days of the battle.



BATTAGLIA DELLA BAINSIZZA

Linee occupate dal XXIV Corpo nei vari giorni della battaglia.

The army corps now faced a new enemy line, hastily organized with machine guns and light artillery very well sited among the rocks along the chain of heights crowning the western rim of the Chiapovano basin.

From 23 August the II Army Corps had advanced along its entire front and, almost without firing a shot, had reached the Austrian defensive line of the Kobilek and the rim of the Chiapovano basin. On the 27th the 53rd Division, commanded by General Gonzaga, also turned that basin from the right.

It was clear that the operation should have continued from that direction, so that our right could turn the new enemy line. Beginning in the south and proceeding northward, that line would then have fallen like a row of playing cards standing on edge, and the advance of the Second Army would have met no further obstacle as far as Aidussina.

But I have already stated what, in my opinion, were the reasons this did not occur. The original formulation of the strategic problem, and perhaps also the habits of positional warfare, must have continued to influence the minds of the higher commands during the operation, so that victory could not be exploited.

The Battle of the Bainsizza therefore remained no more than a frontal attack from Tolmino to the sea, and the breakthrough achieved by the XXIV Army Corps gave us only a few immediate secondary advantages.

The Austrians were surprised by our inaction along the decisive strategic direction—they were already preparing a new defensive line between Adelsberg and Trieste—but they were also alarmed by the danger they had run and from those days began preparing their counterstroke.

On 26 August the Second Army Command placed a cavalry division with three cyclist battalions at the disposal of the XXIV Army Corps.

The army-corps commander observed that, because of the lack of water on the Bainsizza Plateau, the cavalry division had to remain in the Isonzo valley until Austrian resistance along the rim of the Chiapovano basin had been broken. Perhaps then an opportunity would arise to push several squadrons and the cyclist battalions

toward Ternova, Aidussina, or Baca di Modreia. After watering first in the Isonzo, they could water again in the Chiapovano valley.

Meanwhile, it was decided to send the cyclist battalions onto the plateau, where they might be useful, because the available troops—all in the line, since the Sassari Brigade had not yet reached the plateau—were tired from the preceding fighting and had no reserves.

The 26th and 27th of August were marked by increased enemy activity, including violent counterattacks against the front of the 47th Division.

Particularly notable was the attack directed during the morning of the 27th against the Grosseto Brigade, which was temporarily compelled to withdraw its left wing to the road to Vrhovec, where the counterattack was stopped. The Grosseto Brigade immediately regained its position.

* * *

The greatest battle yet fought by the Italian Army may be regarded as ending here. The subsequent fighting on the fronts of the XXIV and II Army Corps consisted chiefly of actions to consolidate the front, because the reinforcement in troops needed to carry the operation beyond the Chiapovano valley was lacking.

It may be said that the interesting part of the whole battle is epitomized in the operation of the XXIV Army Corps, and it is well to summarize it in this way. For us the battle therefore took the name of the Bainsizza, while our enemies called it the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo.

The XXVII Army Corps—commanded by Vanzo until 22 August and then by Badoglio—also contributed to victory by favoring the operation of the XXIV Corps and covering its left flank. The II Corps—commanded by Badoglio until 22 August and then by Montuori—profited from the fall of the Austrian lines, which it had attacked frontally in vain and which were brought down by the turning maneuver of the XXIV Corps.

The frontal operation of the Third Army during the first phase of the battle was largely unnecessary. Merely threatening it would have been enough to hold the Austrians on the Carso in their positions.

But the general strategic concept assigned that army a different task, which it could not accomplish despite its valor and the extremely heavy losses it suffered.

The war communiqué never mentioned the action of the XXIV Army Corps. This omission might prove several things known to me, but it also proves that the Supreme Command attached no importance to the Bainsizza operation and always regarded it as secondary, as it had defined it in the original plan.

The orientation of its ideas, perhaps too rigid, prevented it from exploiting that victory.

10. LOSSES

The XXIV Army Corps had faced fifty-six Austrian battalions and had destroyed forty-five of them as organized units, in addition to several independent machine-gun companies. Approximately 150 guns and 11,000 prisoners fell into our hands.

The great battle fought from Tolmino to the sea cost our army extremely heavy losses, but the XXIV Army Corps suffered fewer than the other corps seriously engaged. Yet it was the only corps whose operation continued without interruption from the beginning to the end of the battle. Within the XXIV Corps, the 47th Division suffered fewer losses than the other division, although from beginning to end it bore the principal part of the battle.

This is always what happens to forces operating along the best direction of attack: with few losses they obtain great results.

The losses of the XXIV Corps during this period, 13-31 August, were:

Officers: 35 killed, 168 wounded, 11 missing.

Other ranks: 914 killed, 3,932 wounded, 1,286 missing.

Altogether, approximately 6,400 men lost.

In the entire Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo, the fifty-one divisions that took part lost 140,000 men—an average of approximately 3,000 men per division. During the battle, the XXIV Army Corps commanded

a force equivalent to five divisions or slightly more and lost an average of 1,200 men per division.

The greater part of its losses occurred in the 60th Division during the crossing of the Isonzo.

The proportion of lightly to seriously wounded was seven to one.

11. CONCLUSION ON THE BATTLE OF THE BAINSIZZA

The Bainsizza operation, as developed by the units of the XXIV Army Corps, was convincing proof that with our troops, organized as they then were, it was possible to obtain whatever was required of them. This, for me, is the principal conclusion to be drawn from that battle.

Both our Allies and ourselves regarded the Bainsizza victory as a great success. In reality, when measured against the extent of the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo, the forces committed, and the opportunities that had presented themselves, it was scarcely more than a mediocre success.

As a secondary matter and by way of instruction, other conclusions could be drawn from the entire development of the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo, from the original concept to the halt of our advance before the new line hastily organized by the Austro-Hungarians along the rim of the Chiapovano basin. Those conclusions contain, I believe, the reason why we failed to obtain from the Bainsizza victory all the results we might have expected. But I have already set them forth in the course of this narrative.

CHAPTER VII

THE ATTITUDE OF THE ITALIAN COMMANDS AFTER THE BATTLE

1. NEW OFFENSIVE IDEAS

The effects of the Bainsizza victory were felt on the Entente's Eastern Front, because they helped induce the Central Powers to abandon a projected offensive in Moldavia intended finally to dispose of Romania.

Our victory, however, made the German Supreme Command fear that Austria-Hungary might not withstand another attack and led it to consider the necessity of coming to her aid.

Meanwhile, the general situation, profoundly altered to the Entente's disadvantage by the defection of the Russian army, was producing its inevitable and foreseeable consequences. Superiority in forces passed to the Central Powers, and with it the initiative in operations necessarily had to pass to them as well.

For several months France had wisely and beneficially remained on the strategic defensive.

Britain, not yet disturbed by German action in Flanders, kept her forces on the offensive, relieving the French front of German pressure.

Italy was accustomed to continual offensive action and was unable to assess the change in the situation. Thus, both through the Bainsizza victory and through the attitude adopted immediately afterward, Italy diverted from the Anglo-French front the first offensive of the Central Powers after they had been freed from Russian pressure and drew it onto her own front.

On 26 August 1917, while the battle had not yet entirely died away on the Bainsizza, the Italian Supreme Command ordered the Third Army to prepare a new attack upon the usual Carso objectives. The Second Army was to support that attack by handing over three

hundred to four hundred medium guns to the Third Army and participating with the artillery of its right wing.

The Third Army began preparing to execute the order, but three days later the Supreme Command showed concern over the heavy losses in men and the great expenditure of ammunition during the latest great battle. It then abandoned that offensive and ordered the Second Army to suspend the nonessential operations in progress on the Bainsizza Plateau and prepare an attack plan intended to bring down the Gorizia amphitheater and prepare the further advance of the Third Army. San Gabriele and San Daniele were specifically named among the objectives of the Second Army, which was to capture them by committing all its offensive energy, supported by the most formidable artillery deployment possible.

This shifting offensive idea of the Supreme Command—migrating from the Third to the Second Army, from the Carso to San Gabriele—combined with concern over losses in men and expenditure of ammunition, and the rather diffuse wording of its directives, revealed that the Supreme Command's conviction regarding the advisability of a new offensive was not profound. It was probably due to the influence of the Second Army Command.

Within the Second Army Command, the offensive state of mind was a perpetual state of grace, in accordance with the classical idea of war. It therefore immediately carried out the attack upon San Gabriele from 4 to 15 September. The attack produced no definitive result, caused heavy losses in men, and consumed an enormous quantity of ammunition—precisely what the Supreme Command had wished, though weakly, to avoid.

This was the last offensive operation of any importance on the Julian front. It left painful traces in the minds of the troops that took part.

At the time it seemed that General Capello had been led to undertake it by regret at having failed to profit from the splendid opportunity that the breakthrough achieved by the XXIV Army Corps on the Bainsizza had offered our offensive, and by the desire to complete belatedly the operation abandoned then.

But the direction chosen for the new attack was not the best. Instead of attempting again to open the gate that the Austrians had only just closed along the rim of the Chiapovano basin, we struck one of its strongest hinges: the strongpoint of San Gabriele.

That attack did, however, relieve our new front on the Bainsizza.

2. THE FIRST INDICATION OF A STRATEGIC DEFENSIVE

On 19 September the Italian Supreme Command issued a general order suspending the strategic offensive and preparing for defense along the entire front. In that order it attributed its decision to the increase of enemy forces on the Julian front.

There is no evidence that the Supreme Command's Situation Office had already reported during the first half of September such an increase of forces against us as to justify so radical a change in our strategic posture.

The movement of Austrian divisions toward our front reported by the Situation Office did not exceed the normal level, and rumors of an offensive against us were vague. They might have seemed credible if related to the general situation, which was genuinely grave and should in itself have led us seriously to adopt the strategic defensive.

In the daily report presented by the Situation Office, however, only one item dated 14 September could have caused us concern, provided it had been related to the general situation. Germany and Austria had closed their frontier with Switzerland, which might indicate an intention to conceal major troop movements.

More than this report, and even more than the moral pressure exerted by the general situation, the Italian Supreme Command appears to have been concerned by the great expenditure of ammunition and the heavy losses in men suffered during the attack upon San Gabriele, added to those of the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo, to the point that it felt compelled to draw in its forces.

It feared that it would not possess sufficient forces or ammunition to meet, in the following spring, the double contingency of opposing a great offensive or itself conducting a large-scale attack.

In sum, the Italian Supreme Command was beginning to feel the influence of the general situation and perhaps even sensed the enemy offensive, but so indistinctly that it still did not exclude the possibility of itself resuming the offensive in the following spring. For the moment, the task was merely to conserve forces and ammunition so as to be ready for either contingency. This state of mind continued, with some fluctuations, until 21 October.

The general defensive posture prescribed by the order of 19 September therefore remained on paper and did not prevent the Second Army, with the Supreme Command's consent, from carrying out several local attacks on the Bainsizza.

Those attacks were superfluous for the purpose they sought to attain. Had the Supreme Command's intentions truly been firmly fixed upon the defensive, we could have improved our lines considerably by making some withdrawals. Among the attacks mentioned, that of 29 September 1917, carried out by the II Army Corps under General Montuori, must be noted.

It began as an attempt to rectify a position on the right of that army corps and spread spontaneously along its entire front and onto the right of the XXIV Corps. It resulted in the capture of more than one thousand prisoners and left the impression that, had it been combined with the attack upon San Gabriele and pressed home with a serious objective, it might have overwhelmed the whole enemy line at Chiapovano.

It showed clearly that the Bainsizza offensive should naturally have been continued through the right wing of the II Army Corps.

3. THE SECOND ARMY'S COUNTEROFFENSIVE PLAN

The order of 19 September to pass to the strategic defensive was received by the Third Army Command with its customary obedience. The Second Army Command, by contrast, because of its different temperament, felt and believed that whatever the situation on the Julian front, only the offensive could resolve it.

Thus, if an attack were directed against Gorizia, the enemy had to be counterattacked southward from the Bainsizza. If, instead, the Austrians attacked us from the Tolmino bridgehead, the best solution would lie in an analogous counterattack northward from the Bainsizza, in order to turn Tolmino and cut it off from its line of operations.

General Capello could argue, with good reason, that it was possible to strike the enemy in time at the opening of his attack, and his offensive spirit was capable of putting the concept into effect. He had already created on and behind the Bainsizza the organization needed to execute it: in the concentration of forces, the artillery deployment, and the man to whom he would entrust the maneuver. He had not, however, properly organized the defense before and north of Tolmino.

These conditions still existed almost in their entirety at the Battle of Caporetto.

But because his counteroffensive concept was not shared by the Supreme Command, yet was not decisively opposed until the eve of the battle, it became one of the principal reasons for our lack of preparation when the Austro-Germans attacked us.

Nevertheless, on that same 19 September, after receiving the Supreme Command's order concerning the passage from the offensive to the strategic defensive, the commander of the Second Army immediately and decisively took his own path, as though he had already been prepared for it.

He was rightly persuaded that south of the Tolmino bridgehead he had in the second line a sufficient density of forces to halt any attack coming in that direction. He did not, however, consider whether the forces before and north of Tolmino were sufficient for defense.

At a conference with his army-corps commanders, he explained that the offensive concept had to be abandoned in favor of a defensive-counteroffensive concept and established fundamental ideas that clearly reveal the aggressiveness of his military character. They may be summarized as follows:

Strengthen the front lines as much as possible, but leave few forces in them, so that the greater part of the troops remains available for local counteroffensive action;

Divide the front into watertight compartments in order to limit the extent of any breach in the front line;

Entrust the defense of the transverse lines chiefly to machine guns;

Move back the excessively bold artillery deployment, while always remaining capable of defending the front line and supporting the transition to the counteroffensive.

It is worth noting that during that conference General Capello referred to the possible necessity of abandoning the part of the Bainsizza north of the Avscek.

He also issued several instructions for a possible withdrawal, such as evacuating all unnecessary matériel to the rear and moving transport closer to the batteries.

In general terms, General Capello's principal idea was sound: to leave few forces in the front line so as to retain strong bodies at hand for launching local counteroffensives wherever the enemy succeeded in breaking through and thereby restore the situation. This idea, like the others expressed above, was approved and adopted by the Supreme Command.

It was indeed sound for the sectors of front south of Tolmino, where the troops were sufficiently dense. It was not applicable before and north of Tolmino, where the very limited forces were scarcely sufficient to man any single line weakly. To put the instruction into practice in those sectors, it would have been necessary to establish an outpost line. In practice, it contributed to weakening still further the sector on which we were later attacked and broken through in the battle that took the name of Caporetto.

APPENDIX

The divisional forces available at the opening of the operation were divided among several columns. Each division retained its forces except for a portion transferred to the army-corps reserve, as indicated below.

The 47th Division formed two groups:

The attack group for the Fratta (507) and the Semmer (675), commanded by Brigadier Colonel Boriani and consisting of six battalions;

The attack group for Point 600, commanded by Brigadier Colonel Leoncini and consisting of three battalions;

A detachment at the disposal of divisional headquarters, consisting of the Monte Pasubio and Monte Tonale Alpine battalions.

The 47th Division had the following artillery, engineer, and trench-mortar forces:

Artillery:

- 9 field batteries (46th Regiment and 1 position battery)
- 5 mountain batteries
- 2 medium-caliber batteries

Engineers:
- 3 sapper companies
- 2 pontoon companies

Trench mortars:

-89 pieces of various calibers (58 A, 240 C, 240 L, 240 A)

-12 pieces of 58 B caliber

The 60th Division formed three assault columns:

The northern column, consisting of two battalions of the Tortona Brigade under Colonel Levi, and the central column, likewise consisting of two battalions of the Tortona Brigade under Lieutenant Colonel Vaccaro, had Kuk 711 and Jelenik 788 as their objectives. One battalion of the Tortona Brigade remained in brigade reserve.

The southern column, consisting of two battalions of the Milano Brigade under Colonel Mogno, had as its objective an attack upon the Jelenik from the south and Point 747 from the north.

One battalion of the Tortona Brigade and one of the Milano Brigade remained in divisional reserve.

The 60th Division also had the following artillery, engineer, and trench-mortar forces:

Artillery:
- 10 field batteries (50th Regiment and 2 position batteries)
- 4 mountain batteries
- 5 medium-caliber batteries

Engineers:
- 3 sapper companies
- 2 pontoon companies

Trench mortars:

- 59 pieces of various calibers (58 A, 240 C, 240 L, 240 A)

The 6th Bersaglieri Regiment and the 159th Infantry formed the army-corps reserve.

The following infantry assembly areas were established for use during the artillery preparation:

For the left group of the 47th Division: the Kotec Potok valley and the small valley of San Veit;

For the right group: the Nekovo valley and the small valley of Collenca;

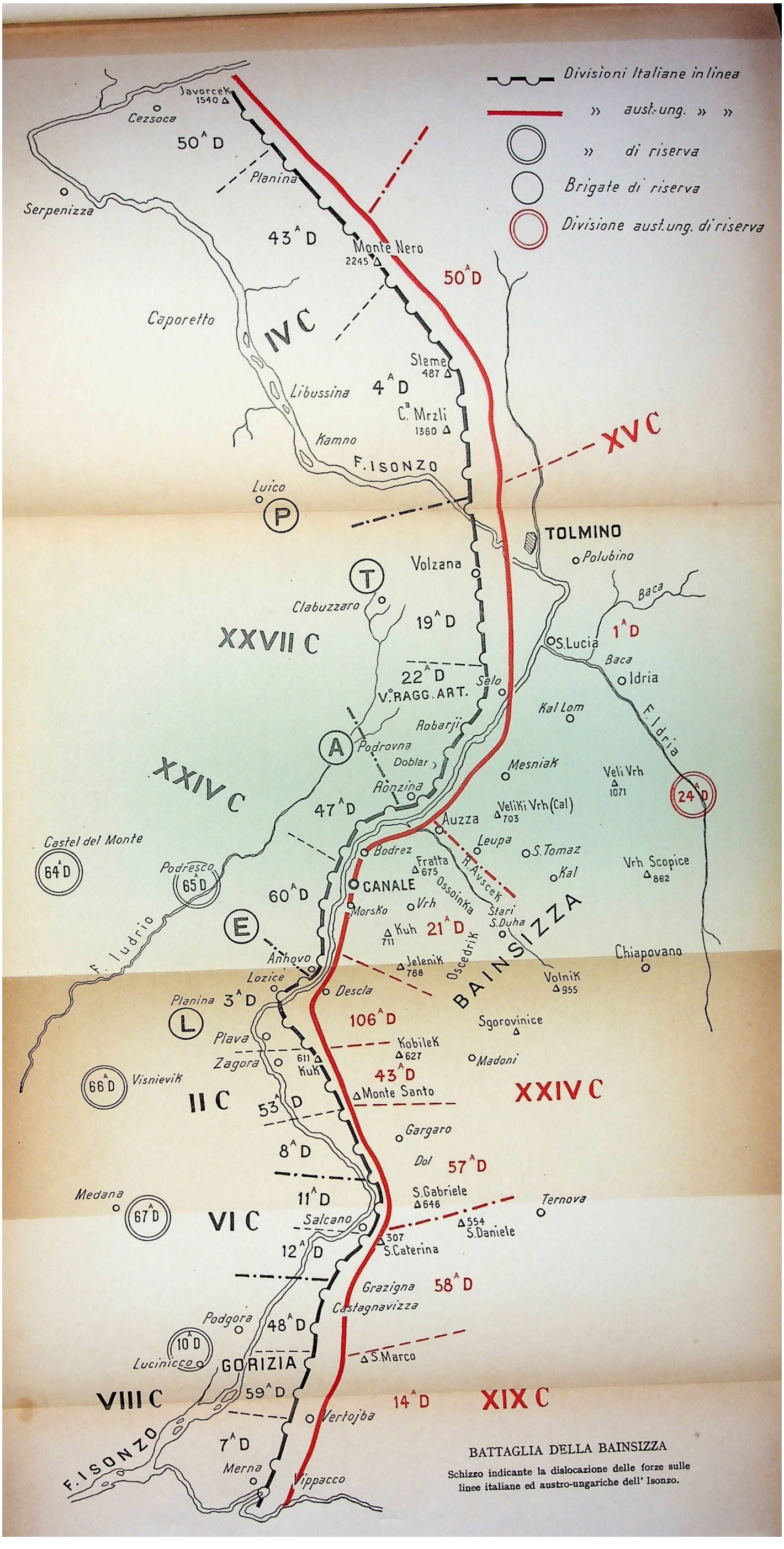
For the northern column of the 60th Division: the Vas valley;

For the central column: the Krestenica valley and Gorenje Polje;

For the southern column: the Ancase valley and the area north of Piava.

GENERAL SKETCH OF THE DISPOSITION OF ITALIAN AND AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN FORCES ON THE ISONZO FRONT

Black scalloped line: IT divisions in the line; red line: AH divisions in the line; double black circle: reserve divisions; single black circle: reserve brigades; double red circle: AH reserve division



BATTAGLIA DELLA BAINSIZZA

Schizzo indicante la dislocazione delle forze sulle linee italiane ed austro-ungariche dell' Isonzo.